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Source: *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (May, 1998), pp. 267-290

Published by: Wiley on behalf of the American Anthropological Association

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coming to terms with Navajo *nádleehí*: a critique of *berdache*, “gay,” “alternate gender,” and “two-spirit”

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In the course of the last seven years, I have been learning from and about Navajo persons known as *nádleehí*, or, as Hill describes them, “hermaphrodites . . . or those who pretend to be” (1935:275).¹ Traditionally,² *nádleehí* have practiced certain behaviors—such as attire, occupation, and, on occasion, sexual partner preference—in a manner associated with the gender of the opposite sex. Thus, a male *nádleehí* may (to varying degrees) wear women’s clothing; participate in activities associated with women, such as cooking and washing; and have sexual relations with other men. In general this configuration of “other-gender” behaviors has been treated as a single phenomenon across cultures and such individuals have been termed *berdache*.

But with the greater focus on gender and sexuality in anthropology and heightened sensitivity to Native American voices and categories, the term *berdache* has been criticized (e.g., Jacobs and Thomas 1994:7). As a result alternate terms and categories such as *gay*, *alternate gender*, and *two-spirit* have arisen. Most agree that *berdache*, with its French meaning of “male prostitute,” is problematic; but in creating new categories, many rely on *berdache*’s emphasis on other-gender behaviors, same-sex sexual practices, and unique roles, thereby creating slight variations on the same themes. The use of *alternate gender* suggests that in mixed-gender behaviors there is evidence for an altogether different gender (Jacobs 1983; Jacobs and Cromwell 1992); *gay* emphasizes the “multi-dimensional social role,” and, less overtly, sexual practices of *nádleehí* and others (Roscoe 1988); and *two-spirit* describes those with “both a male and a female spirit” in terms of gender and sexual practices (Tafoya 1992:256; Jacobs and Thomas 1994:7).³

As I argue, however, none of these categories is adequate. I follow instead Halperin’s approach, developed from the historical study of sexual practices. He redirects attention away from the cultural uses of terms (e.g., do the Iroquois have *berdache*?) toward their cultural meanings. He describes “the real issue” as twofold: “First of all [it is] how to recover the terms in which the experiences of individuals belonging to past societies were actually constituted, and second, [it is] how to measure and assess the ones we currently employ” (1990:28–29). To these points I respond with two questions of my own: First, what are the premises or epistemological assumptions of the four categories? And second, are the premises of the categories consistent with a Navajo worldview (at least with the version I am beginning to learn) and thus with how many Navajos understand *nádleehí*? Unlike other studies, then, my inquiry extends beyond determining the absence or presence of alternate

In this article I assess what premises underlie the categories berdache, “alternate gender,” “gay,” and “two-spirit”; and whether these premises are relevant to the ways in which many Navajos construct the “alternate gender” of those known as nádleehí. Proponents of these categories often extricate traits from their contexts and perceive male and female as mutually opposed, absolute values. Many Navajos, however, describe traits as inseparable from the universe and view male and female as situational values. [Native American, Navajo, gender, sexuality, worldview]

American Ethnologist 25(2):267–290. Copyright © 1998, American Anthropological Association.

genders, gays, and so forth, or debating the relative merits of one category over another. I rely on Navajo frameworks to learn “the terms by which the experiences are constituted” and so “measure and assess” the four categories (Halperin 1990:28–29).

My privileging of certain Navajo frameworks is rather simple. The synthesis of *nádleehí* and others into a single category has often ignored the variability across Native American cultures and left unexamined the relevance of gender and sexuality. It seems only logical that frameworks arising from the cultures in which *nádleehí* developed (and cultures on which *nádleehí* act) would reveal far more (and would do so more soundly) about who and how *nádleehí* are than would superimposed categories and concepts.⁴ Also, by looking at *nádleehí* in certain Navajo frameworks, we can see concepts thought to be implicit in the terms *berdache*, *alternate gender*, *gay*, and *two-spirit* (such as gender and sexual practices) as constructs; consequently, their usage can be understood in some cases as responses to political and historic events.

But this endeavor requires qualification. I do not purport to represent some “true emic”—there are many Navajo emics, and my discussion of Navajo ways of knowing reflects some of my own Euro-American biases. What I present is a superficial learning of one approach to Navajo knowledge among many. My reliance on a particular Navajo worldview is based in part on its analytical power—it brings clarity to Navajo understandings that are otherwise inscrutable. For example, *nádleehí* define themselves in terms of both male and female, as interconnected with their surroundings, and as varying with specific context.⁵ Current analytical concepts simply do not accommodate the simultaneous distinctness (identity as *nádleehí*) and fluidity (identity as context-dependent) of *nádleehí*’s self-descriptions.

Neither is the article an exegesis of a single, alternative *nádleehí* definition; indeed, I doubt that one would be possible. *Nádleehí* express themselves differently with different groups of people, Navajo definitions of *nádleehí* vary widely, and the particular Navajo worldview I am learning seems to place more emphasis on situation-based definitions than on fixed categories. Instead I point out the flaws in the (putatively) cross-cultural and ahistorical categories, while calling for a shift back to culturally relative and specific understandings.

Readers should understand that I use such key terms as *gay*, *berdache*, and related categories as approximations. It will be apparent when I use the term *gay* with its Euro-American connotations and when I use it as a gloss on Navajo concepts. The phrase “*nádleehí* and others who may be similar,” or some variant, underscores that *nádleehí* are my point of reference for understanding other so-called berdaches and that cross-cultural comparability with *nádleehí* should not be assumed. I refer to my *nádleehí* teachers, all of whom are males, with feminine pronouns, in keeping with the way in which they often refer to themselves and other *nádleehí*.

My comments do not necessarily apply to all Navajo *nádleehí*. My *nádleehí* teachers were between 20 and 40 years old, male, lived on or close to the reservation, retained varying degrees of Navajo traditional practices, spoke Navajo and English, and had extensive interaction with Euro-American cultures. My observations may not have relevance for deeply traditional *nádleehí*, *nádleehí* in different age groups, female *nádleehí*, or various other groups.

In what follows I focus on three areas, beginning with an analysis of the classificatory principles underlying the four categories. Second, I examine each category, pointing out its major limitations and strengths, and several of its epistemological premises. Third, I compare the categories’ classificatory premises with various Navajos’ constructions of *nádleehí*, illustrating the inadequacy of the categories. In consequence I argue for a “deep” cultural contextualization to understand *nádleehí* as well as those who are assumed to be similar to them.

classificatory principles

Founded on positive, ascertainable, and objective behavioral phenomena—on the facts of who had sex with whom—the new sexual taxonomy [homo- versus heterosexuality] could lay claim to a descriptive transhistorical validity. And so it crossed the “threshold of scientificity” and was enshrined as a working concept in the social and physical sciences. [Halperin 1990:16]⁶

Halperin notes how a set of phenomena is identified (in this case, sexual partner's sex), elevated to universal salience, and assumed to be meaningful across time and cultures. In other words, one may focus on same-sex sexual practices in, say, ancient Greece, and, having decided that this behavior exists beyond the constraints of time and culture as something called "homosexuality," can then pronounce other same-sex unions as instances of "homosexuality."

Using much the same process, many researchers, both Native and non-Native, have classified nádleehí (as well as their assumed counterparts in other cultures) as berdache, gay, alternate gender, or two-spirit.⁷ They assume that certain aspects exist outside the influence of culture, and thus can be applied to all Native American cultures to determine whether such entities as berdache, alternate gender, and so forth exist.⁸ Weston's cogent description identifies the "behavioral phenomena" generally considered transhistorically valid: "Berdache is another catch-all term that ethnographers have used to describe males (or, less often, females) who take on at least some of the garments, occupations, and/or sexual partners culturally prescribed for what Anglo-Europeans might call the opposite sex" (1993b:351–352). Although there are qualifications—individuals possess different degrees of the aspects, no single aspect is necessarily present in all berdaches, and so on—traits remain the primary means for identifying nádleehí (and other Native peoples thought to be similar).

But the presence of the same behavior (such as same-sex sex) in two different time periods or societies does not mean that the behavior is equivalent in meaning. As Padgug notes, that different societies "share general sexual forms [does] not make the contents and meaning of these impulses and forms identical or undifferentiated. They must be carefully distinguished and separately understood, since their inner structures and social meanings and articulations are very different" (1979:11). The same holds true for attire, occupation, and the other alleged berdache traits—categorizing individuals across cultures and times on the basis of a handful of supposedly transcultural and historical features misses the dynamic and rich contexts from which these behaviors derive meaning.⁹ Indeed, one need often look no further than within a single society or to an individual to realize that a trait changes meaning with time, place, and situation.¹⁰

In relying on traits such as "male in women's attire doing women's work" to identify a nádleehí, those who use these categories make rather bold assumptions. These include the following: that all cultures define and use the concept "trait" in a similar manner; traits are equally relevant within and across cultures; individuals define themselves as the categories imply (that is, as an aggregate of traits); and constructions of self are similar enough to permit comparison of a nádleehí with other so-called alternate genders, such as a Lakota *winkte* or a Tewa *kwidó*. The categories also require that an individual's identity be separable from other cultural aspects; otherwise, that identity is not reducible to specific traits. In other words, the categories cast the individual's relationship with the universe as a discontinuous one. The following suggests that these and other assumptions are erroneous.

specific categories

gay The use of the term *gay* to describe nádleehí (and others with perceived commonalities) involves many issues, of which same-sex sexual practices is perhaps the most contentious. Roscoe and Williams, both proponents of "gay," associate the "berdache" or "alternate gender" with same-sex sexual practices in their terminology and categorical constructs. Although they note that occupation and religious roles are important features of a Native American *gay* or *queen*, (Roscoe's [1988:65] and Williams's [1986:126] terms, respectively), they nonetheless retain a strong emphasis on same-sex sexual practices. Williams explains that, except for an occasional opposite-sex relationship, "homosexual attraction is an important aspect of the berdache character" (1986:125–126). And Roscoe suggests that "alternate gender/sexualities"

are the trunk of a family tree, from which “berdache/alternate gender” and various forms of “homosexuality” branch (1991:211).¹¹

This reliance on sexuality to classify individuals, however, is a relatively new phenomenon, and one open to a variety of interpretations. While Boswell (1990) may concur with Roscoe’s idea (1988) of a “gay history,” transcending time and cultural places,¹² others do not. To some (e.g., Foucault 1978), the construct of “sexuality” is a product, at least in part, of modern power relations; D’Emilio, for example, contends that “homosexuality” was made possible by capitalism (1993:469). Sexuality is not, as Boswell argues (1990:22), a given.

With the development of sexuality, classification shifted away from passive versus active roles, masculine versus feminine styles, and so forth to a “sexual identity” based on “the binary play of sameness and difference in the sexes of sexual partners” (Halperin 1990:16). Along with this “new taxonomy” came the notion that “human beings are individuated at the level of their sexuality . . . and, indeed, belong to different types or kinds of being by virtue of their sexuality” (Halperin 1993:417). Padgug describes this as an “enshrinement of contemporary sexual categories as universal, static, and permanent, suitable for the analysis of all human beings and all societies” (1979:8).¹³

It appears that Roscoe, Williams, and others have frequented the shrine of The Perpetual Homosexual and, in so doing, not only have overlooked the cultural boundedness of sexuality as a concept but also subsume *nádleehí* (and possibly others with similar characteristics) under the principles of present-day sexuality classification—an unfounded inclusion.¹⁴ And yet, as Besnier notes, an identification with *nádleehí* and others who may be similar is “understandable in the context of lesbians’ and gays’ struggle for a political voice in postindustrial societies”; thus they attempt to “demonstrate that preindustrial societies are more ‘tolerant’ . . . or ‘accommodating’ of erotic diversity and gender variation than ‘the West’ ” (1994:316). The benefits of identifying with “preindustrial” societies are many: thus, for example, Williams looks to “the American Indian concept of spirituality to break out of the deviancy model to reunite families and to offer special benefits to society as a whole” (1986:207). And Roscoe adds, “I have no difficulty imagining the rationale and rewards of specializing in a work otherwise considered female. My own consciousness has thus absorbed the berdache” (1984:48, as quoted in Williams 1986:207).¹⁵

The differentiation of humans by sexuality contrasts sharply with the ethnographic record. Jacobs and Cromwell explain that the Tewa *kwidó* engage not only in same-sex sexual practices but can have sex with men, women, or other *kwidó* (1992:56). Several male *nádleehí* cultural teachers described sexual relationships with women, and some *nádleehí* (PK, PA, EB) were (and are) celibate. Neither are *nádleehí* the only ones who have same-sex sex. *Nádleehí*’s partners (sometimes called “straights”) generally retain their status as masculine men and are not considered “homosexuals.” From the limited data I have, it also appears that sexual unions with *nádleehí* in earlier times¹⁶ were determined more by issues of convenience and situation than by one’s sexuality.¹⁷ EB, a *nádleehí*, explains, “The *nádleehí* would help keep heterosexual men happy, and alleviate their sexual frustrations. . . . If all of a man’s wives were pregnant, he could go to a *nádleehí*.”

But *gay* is not entirely without its merits: it encourages awareness of both Native Americans’ identities and their terms of self-reference. Williams notes that some Native American individuals, having “been exposed to urban gay communities . . . see themselves as *gay*, not *berdache*” (1986:215). In identifying strongly with the Euro-American gay community, “they want to be treated as men . . . not like a halfman-halfwoman” (Williams 1986:215). Moreover, in selecting the terms *gay* and *queen* to discuss *nádleehí* (and others with possible similarities), Williams (1986:225) and Roscoe (1988:65) use the terms by which those of so-called alternate genders are frequently mentioned and by which they refer to themselves. Furthermore, both note that

Native American and Euro-American meanings of *gay* or *queen* are not necessarily similar to each other, an observation consistent with my own and others' research.¹⁸

The interplay between the use of *gay* and *nádleehí* gives insight into various Navajo ways of understanding *nádleehí*, and how the understandings are changing. WA, a *nádleehí* in her mid-twenties, appears to emphasize sexuality in noting that *nádleehí* originally "founded a homosexual society [in which] they were looked up to." In contrast, HA, a traditional *Diné* scholar,¹⁹ highlights other-gender behavior when he defines "gay" as "a boy that's acting like a girl [or vice versa]." CB's focus is different again; she states, "Nádleehí's a holy word and should not be used to refer to gays." And CY suggests such distinctions may be less important to Navajo elders: "I wonder what the elders would think of all this. They'd probably just laugh."

While the concept of *nádleehí* as "holy" is confirmed by Hill (1935), and may be alluded to in the Navajo origin teachings (e.g., Haile 1981; O'Bryan 1956), this perception was not necessarily universal. HA notes that "in earlier times" certain clans let hermaphroditic infants die. The association of *nádleehí* with hermaphroditism also varies (GB): while some uphold the distinction between "real" (i.e., hermaphroditic) and "pretend" (i.e., nonhermaphroditic) *nádleehí*, others do not. HA, for example, notes that the concept of *nádleehí* may have started with hermaphrodites and was later generalized to the "pretend ones," but the distinction was not necessarily important—both "real" and "pretend" *nádleehí* were often accorded respect. Another Navajo cultural teacher explained that people usually did not talk about genitalia; thus, who was and was not a "true" hermaphrodite may not have been shared beyond immediate family members.²⁰

Other historical contexts also need to be considered in Navajo meanings of "gay." With the attempts to Christianize and assimilate Navajos, many *nádleehí* have encountered increasing Navajo intolerance and reduced recognition and support of their—variously defined—identities and roles.²¹ As a result, *nádleehí* are often faced with forging new identities that draw on both Navajo and Western cultures. RN explains, "We tend to get our ideas for what it means to be gay from Western ideas, so you see [Navajo] gays calling themselves 'queens,' and doing a lot of the camp that you would see in the Western gay community."²² But they also retain identification with "traditional" cultural values of *nádleehí*: many, for example, still eschew sexual relationships with other *nádleehí* and find explanations for their existence in Navajo teachings.²³

Although "gay" can provide important insights into some Navajos' (and possibly others') classificatory systems, its use as a generic term for *nádleehí* (or for those Native Americans with presumed commonalities) remains unwarranted. By placing *nádleehí* in the schema of sexuality, proponents of "gay" imply that sexuality, despite its distinctly modern origins, is not culturally or historically bounded; furthermore, they make the same assumption about many Navajos' classifications—that is, that definitions of *nádleehí* are constant; are removed from other social, cultural, and historical phenomena; and are thus unchanging regardless of time, clan membership, degree of traditionality, or exposure to Christianity. In suggesting that "gay" or other Euro-American gay-derived terms can function as a generic label, Williams and Roscoe overstate *gay's* significance and seem to imply a Native American heritage for Euro-American gay and lesbian identities. But the ethnographic data are clear: Euro-American gay and lesbian roots are not awaiting "discovery" in Native American soils.²⁴

alternate gender and berdache The category *alternate gender* challenges both "berdache" and sexuality-based definitions of *nádleehí* (and others who may be similar).²⁵ By suggesting that more than two genders could exist, alternate gender theorists question the universality of a binary-gender system,²⁶ and with it, the formulation of a "berdache" as simply a "mixer" or "crosser" of man and woman (Devereux 1937:501; Whitehead 1981:85). As a result, "alternate

gender” proponents conceive of *nádleehí* (or others with possibly shared commonalities) as not merely derivative of the two genders but as a gender in its own right.

Among its strengths, the category “alternate gender” enables us to distinguish among the various phenomena lumped together under the category “berdache.” For example, ceremonial transvestism (wearing the attire of another gender for ceremonial purposes) is frequently cited as an instance of “berdache,” since it is a somewhat regular social practice associated with the gender of the opposite sex. But as Parsons notes, a Native American male dance society may take on the dress of women for ceremonial practices without being considered “men-women,” or “berdaches” (1920:28). “Alternate gender” accommodates these situations by requiring that the trait (such as attire) be associated with a shift in gender status. Thus, if the other-gender trait is not associated with a different social role, the individual does not belong to an “alternate gender.”²⁷

The idea of “multiple genders” (that is, more than man and woman) also addresses the relevance of sexuality-based definitions. Thomas (1993) describes four Navajo genders: female-bodied women, male-bodied men, female-bodied *nádleehí*, and male-bodied *nádleehí*. In this system male *nádleehí* same-sex sexual practices are not equivalent to many present-day Euro-American homosexual or gay practices, since *nádleehí* partners are of a *different gender* (usually male-bodied men) than *nádleehí*, while present-day Western gays and their partners are of the *same gender* (Thomas 1993:4–5). By positing sexual practices as secondary expressions of the overall gender system—claiming that gender status occurs first and that sexual practices are simply expressions of one’s gender role—this classification challenges those who would locate sexual practices in some fundamental, all-determining aspect of the individual such as sexual orientation (Thomas 1993:5).

Ethnographic data are initially consistent with the idea of “alternate genders.” First, “alternate genders” are often designated by specific terms such as Zuni *lhamana*, Lakota *winkte*, and so forth.²⁸ Second, *nádleehí* (and other Native Americans who may be comparable) have characteristics different from men or women, such as exceptional physical abilities, specific attire, enhanced “spirituality,” a highly respected status, and association with wealth (Callender and Kochems 1983). “Alternate gender” affords a heuristic benefit, as well, as Blackwood explains:

To call the berdache “role” a separate gender gives it the full status of a “gender”. . . equivalent to that of “man” or “woman”. . . . The berdache gender, then, is not a deviant role . . . nor is it an alternative role behavior for nontraditional individuals who are still considered men or women. [1988:171]

Given their unique labels and roles, *nádleehí* (and possibly those of similar identity) seem to possess a clearly defined status and are not merely opposite-gender wanna-bes.

Finally, the idea of genders beyond man or woman addresses feminist theoretical, political, and social goals. For one thing, categories such as *nádleehí* and *winkte* illustrate the point that gender is not a natural given. As Martin and Voorhies conclude from a review of “berdache” and others, “biological sex is used by societies to build social categories, and human ingenuity permits more elaboration on the biological theme than at first seems possible” (1975:107). Once we view gender as distinct from sex, several absolute distinctions begin to crumble: a female (or a male) is not bound by biology to a set role, societal dictates and repression along gender lines can no longer find justification in an assumed state of nature, and so forth. Additionally, if gender is a social construct, the assumed ubiquity of a binary gender system falls apart, and with it the hierarchical dualism between man and woman and (to some) the dualistic order of modernity itself (Fox-Genovese 1993:246).

More recently, sex has also become a “construct,” a by-product of a hegemonic system that established sex, gender, and desire as “naturally congruent” (hence the assumption that a male becomes a man and has sex only with women [Butler 1990:151, n. 6]). The individual whose sex does not correspond with gender or desire, such as the male who dresses in women’s clothing or has sex with other males, is seen as disrupting this “heterosexual matrix” (Butler 1990:151, n. 6). In so doing, the individual reveals that gender is a performance, a compilation

of various actions prescribed and “compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence,” giving the “illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 1990:24, 140). Obviously the “discovery” of persons such as Navajo nádleehí or Zuni lhamana did not singlehandedly bring about feminism, the push for gender equality, the downfall of modernism, or the upsurge of performance theory. But the possibility of recognizing more than two genders and of ceasing to assume that gender identity was necessarily derived from sex is clearly central to many social goals (deliverance from biology as destiny) and political agendas (disruption of the masculine, heterosexist hegemony). It is little wonder that with such momentous issues at hand, interest in Native American gender practices has been high.

As promising as “alternate gender” may appear, it has some significant shortcomings. For one, it does not adequately address the question of what constitutes “gender.” Weston notes that its classifications do not specify when a role “stop[s] being an instance of gendered ambiguity, or a variant of masculinity or femininity, and start[s] becoming a gender in its own right” (1993b:354). Besnier, drawing on Polynesian data, notes that “gender liminals” contrast sharply with man and woman in “the grammar of kinship” and in the relative “porosity” of the categories; thus, “gender liminals” may not warrant a full-fledged gender status (1994:319).²⁹

Other problems with “alternate gender” include its “uncanny” resonance with “the 19th-century categorization of homosexuals as members of a third sex” (Weston 1993b:354).³⁰ Murray (1994:60) also questions the specificity of “alternate-gender” traits and points out that a “basketball superstar” could belong to an “alternate gender”:³¹ each category is a specific status grounded in a shared range of diagnostic features (such as distinctive dress, occupation, and association with wealth), is linguistically designated, and combines masculine and feminine behaviors.³² Additionally, “gender” and “sexuality” are assumed to be relevant criteria in cultures’ classifications of persons such as nádleehí and in universally agreed constructs (Murray 1994:59; Weston 1993b:346–347).

Of final concern is the political saliency of “alternate gender.” As I have mentioned above, the construct meshes well with current feminist political, social, and theoretical agendas, at least initially. But is it not possible that the existence of Navajo nádleehí is not in fact evidence of third genders but is instead constructed as such, given current theoretical interests? And yet the configuration of persons such as nádleehí as belonging to “alternate genders” is understandable—the marginalization of women, as well as “gender blenders” and other so-called gender nonconformists, has been fierce (Devor 1989).³³

It would consequently appear that the role of nádleehí—and, possibly, of others who share assumed commonalities—is not one of gender at all. Ironically, casting them as such 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. In setting up nádleehí (and presumably similar others) as belonging to a “third (or fourth, fifth, and so on) gender,” theorists reify Man and Woman as binary opposites, using them as standards by which to identify “alternates.” Furthermore, the relegation of nádleehí (or winkte, kwidó, and so forth) to an additional gender status sets gender incongruence apart, keeps the meanings of “man” and “woman” safe from its disruptive influences, and thus forecloses the opportunity for truly radical reformulations of gender. As long as there remains an “alternate,” Man and Woman can be nothing other than a male who became a man and has sex with a female who became a woman; anything else will be “other,” “third,” “alternate,” “deviant.” “Alternate gender” theorists and others seem to have undermined their own efforts: instead of challenging binary classification, they have made it requisite to their schemas; and instead of dispensing with the “Othering” of Woman, they have created a new “Othering”—that of the Native American, Melanesian, Indian, or other Alternate Gender.³⁴

two-spirit *Two-spirit* was formulated by several Native Americans (who are “self-identified ‘alternative’ sex and gendered” (*sic*) [Jacobs and Thomas 1994:7]) and differs from the preceding

three terms in many (but not all) assumptions about gender. The term is “a contested compromise to move forward the debate in eliminating culturally inappropriate terms,” and includes a wide variety of Native persons: “cross-dressers, transvestites, lesbian, gay, transgendered, or [those] otherwise ‘marked’ as ‘alternatively gendered’ within tribes, bands, and nations where multiple gender concepts occur” (Jacobs and Thomas 1994:7).³⁵

The wide range of *two-spirits*, or persons “who combine both masculine and feminine personality traits,” results in part from the contexts in which the term was proposed. Lang (1993:13) and Tafoya (1992:256) note that contemporary Native peoples lack identification with Euro-American categories such as gay, lesbian, or bisexual; furthermore, within Euro-American gay cultures, racism against Native peoples can occur. Affiliation with the “Indian community” remains important; two-spirits frequently emphasize “Native American identity” over sexual identities and use Pan-Indian ceremonial features (Lang 1993:13–14).³⁶

The concept’s inclusivity also stems from what many view as “Native American gender” (Tafoya 1992:256; cf. Allen 1981), in which spiritual or social identity is emphasized over psychosexual. Tafoya suggests that “tribal concepts” emphasize “relationships, contexts, and interactions,” not the “individuality” of “Euro-American concepts” (1992:256). To him, “‘Gay’ can be seen as a noun, but ‘Two-Spirit’ is a verb. (This is meant as a metaphoric statement, where a noun is a place, person or thing, where a verb deals with actions and interactions)” (Tafoya 1992:256). Two-spirited individuals, then, are acting and interacting to define and redefine themselves. This dynamic self-defining, according to Tafoya, is based on “Native tradition” that “emphasizes transformation and change, and the idea that an individual is expected to go through many changes in a lifetime” (1992:257). Given the constant flux of one’s identity, it is little wonder that a Native American-generated category, such as “two-spirit,” requires only that one be both male and female, and Native American. The sexual, gender, or other manifestations of one’s two-spiritedness are understood to vary as widely as humanity itself.

The perception of self as male (or man) and female (or woman) is also a feature of “berdache” and “alternate gender”: in both categories participation in men’s and women’s activities is a criterial attribute. But “alternate gender,” “berdache,” and “two-spirit” do not converge in respect to the specific gender constructions. Tafoya, for example, notes that Euro-Americans define gender rigidly, while Native Americans’ classifications “range from appropriateness to inappropriateness depending on the context of a situation” (1992:254). In consequence, “Native individuals may be quite comfortable with their presented identity shifting its emphasis on so-called ‘masculine/feminine’ behavior, depending upon social context and the behavior/identity of a partner” (Tafoya 1992:258).

Two commonalities between “two-spirit” and the preceding three categories require brief mention. First, “two-spirit” also relies on traits, in that this category examines gender-associated behaviors in order to assess the individual’s degree of male- and female-spiritedness. Second, although “two-spirit” implies that both masculine and feminine can be expressed by the same person and that gender delineation is somewhat fuzzy, it presupposes that what is masculine or feminine is for all intents and purposes known and stable across situations and cultures. Such an assumption is essential to the categories: if male or female were situationally defined, then what was male in one instance could later be defined as female. The “male-female” person would be unknowable, varying among “female,” “male,” and “male-female” as the interpretation of masculinity and femininity changed. By maintaining that masculine and feminine are not situational values, however, the proponents of the “two-spirit” category ensure identification of “one-” versus “two-spirited” individuals, regardless of circumstance.

While the term *two-spirit* offers many benefits, such as its emphasis on Native American priorities and gender constructs, its adoption by academia as a generic label should be carefully evaluated. The decision to apply any construct or category to many cultures should arise from sound research, which involves first determining whether the category’s criterial attributes and

classificatory principles are relevant to other cultures. In that “two-spirit” arose out of concerns for empowerment and identity in the face of derogatory labels and racism, it may be less precise as a research tool. As I point out in more detail below, the term *two-spirit* is not applicable to many *nádleehí* and, I suggest, lacks significance for other Native peoples; its usefulness as a generic term may therefore be limited. Students of Native peoples certainly must listen to those whom they profess to describe. If we impose a term that may be irrelevant to many of our cultural teachers, however, we are once again re-creating their world to suit our own intentions.³⁷

The conflation of diverse Native cultures in the category “two-spirit” rests on its emphasis on Pan-Indian identity; in the other three categories, the conflation is not so easily dismissed. Each of those categories implies that *nádleehí*, their possible counterparts, and the cultures in which they live share the same emphasis on gender and possibly other features; prioritize and interrelate attire, occupation, sexual practices, and so on according to only the categorical specification of “berdache,” “gay,” or “alternate gender”; and, through an assumption of transhistoric or transcultural traits, class individuals in mutually exclusive categories of man, woman, and “berdache,” “gay,” or “alternate gender.” Each also suggests that attention to a few traits suffices to account for the dynamic and diverse processes with which cultures shape (and are shaped by) their participants. In overemphasizing gender and sexuality, then, the cultural contexts in which the “alternate genders,” “gays,” “berdaches,” and “two-spirits” emerged have been forgotten. While the motivations behind such overemphases may be understandable and even laudable—such as seeking societies more “tolerant” of diverse gender and sexual practices; contesting the mandated congruence of sex, gender, desire; undermining rigid, hierarchical dualisms; uniting against racism; and subverting masculinist hegemonies—the classifications have subsisted at the expense of deeper ethnographic understanding. An exploration of a specific cultural contextualization begins to reveal what depths have been overlooked.

Navajo ethnographic findings

These four categories are at odds with the way in which many Navajos understand such things as male and female, the meanings of traits, and the role of traits in defining the individual, and in which they thereby call into question the analytic utility of the categories for apprehending the diverse Navajo meanings of the term *nádleehí*. I begin with a version of Navajo worldview,³⁸ relying on it in part because of the diffuse nature of definitions of *nádleehí*. For example, three *nádleehí* describe themselves in these terms:

BH: Well, like in my case, I am different from a “straight” male, a heterosexual male, and from a homosexual male. I mean with homosexual males I am uncomfortable, but I’m more comfortable with “straight” males, even though there are hassles sometimes and stuff. I also connect with a heterosexual male, sometimes.

[Later] I am a complete woman, just without the vagina. I’m gay and I’m comfortable with that, but sometimes I wish I were different, you know, like have more womanly qualities, even the parts.

[And later yet in the interview] Like if I had to choose between a queen and a woman [as a sexual partner], I’d rather have a woman than a queen. I mean I do have some kind of maleness.

PA: That’s the funny thing about it, there’s an in-between type of person. It’s hard to understand. Not being a drag queen and not being a woman. I think it’s all psychological—I don’t want to be a drag queen, and I don’t want to be a girl.

PK: A queen is identified with a female. You know, you call her girl, bitch, witch, and things like that. But for me, I don’t consider myself a girl. I’m a man and am attracted to men.

In the above definitions, *nádleehí* illustrate several important premises. First, an individual is understood in terms of her interconnections, and as both male and female. Thus, BH and PK describe themselves in relation to men and women, and PA does so in terms of “drag queens”

and women. Second, no individual's definition is fixed; all vary according to the situation. BH, for example, changes definitions depending on discussion topic and our increased familiarity. Finally, while many nádleehí agree on how the definition is structured (namely, as interconnected, situational, and as both male and female), they do not necessarily agree on its content. The description of nádleehí, then, requires a framework capable of accommodating these constructs of the individual; the framework within which my Navajo cultural teachers explained nádleehí is known as Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó, or "the natural order."

The use of Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó, however, presents an intriguing tension. An approach from cultural relativism such as the one I attempt necessitates the acceptance of Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó largely on its own terms—that is, as in DB's definition, "a set of facts or principles detailing how the world is organized and works." This generates an essentialist position: Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó appears to exist outside the contexts of time, personal situation, and larger societal issues, all aspects that I have criticized others' approaches for overemphasizing. But Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó remains a relevant explanatory framework of nádleehí for a variety of reasons.

First, essentialisms cannot be entirely avoided; even the most antiessentialist approach requires some measure of precision. For example, if I were to describe Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó solely as it relates to issues of power, age, gender, and the like, and so demonstrate that it was tendentious, I would reduce it to the equally tendentious truths of antiessentialism (namely, that nothing exists outside context, any supposed truth or constant essence being derivative). I would assert that cultural teachers err when they describe Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó as valid and real beyond these contexts. If, however, I choose to take Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó as factual, I again rely on a set of truths; in this view, Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó provides an accurate depiction of the universe and is not entirely reducible to the contexts from which it was derived. Either interpretation requires some set of assumptions and by the very nature of assumptions, an abiding core of reality—a fundamental essence—is present (even if that reality is the absence of realness). Since essentialism is ultimately unavoidable, it seems far better to privilege the essentialisms of the cultures in which nádleehí have developed and on which they act than to privilege the essentialisms of antiessentialism.³⁹

Second, Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó is a system of knowledge containing basic observations of the universe that, to many, serve as truths. At another level, however, it is also variable: while such principles as situationality and interconnectedness may remain constant, their interpretation does not.⁴⁰ In a sense, it is both essentialist and context-dependent. For example, when Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó is used in education, the emphases vary with the educators' needs.⁴¹ It is also cited to support any number of different positions, including who is nádleehí and which of their behaviors are appropriate; thus its usage and interpretation are malleable in response to the speaker's intent.⁴² And while many Navajos make sense of the universe in terms of Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó, whatever its interpretation, others do not.

Finally, this is not a definitive interpretation of nádleehí. I explore Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó because its basic principles significantly challenge the four gender- and sexual practice-based categories, and so afford insights into nádleehí not otherwise available.⁴³ While the interpretation I favor is by no means universally applicable, it is internally consistent with (and relies on) the principles of Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó, and is one with which I have some familiarity.

I focus primarily on five principles of Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó as DB explained them to me: it is male and female and organizes everything as male and female; it is a living cycle and organizes everything as a cycle; it interconnects everything; through that interconnectedness it cycles everything into everything; and it is an ongoing cycle, since each male or female has the other (i.e., female or male, respectively) into which it can cycle.

According to DB, *Sá'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó* can be understood in male aspects, or *Sá'ah Naaghái*, which include protection, aggressiveness, and building up one's defenses; and female aspects, or *Bik'eh Hózhó*, which include fruitfulness, creativity, and nurturance (cf. Farella 1984). Everything exists in terms of this arrangement: humans, air, and water as well as less tangible things like thought or emotions. All males and females are themselves both male and female, a condition that DB explains in terms of the Sun, the "male" aspect in the Sun-Moon pair:

The Sun gives you strength and grows the food you eat. From that you grow and can do all sorts of productive, creative things [i.e., the female aspect]. But you need protection from too much Sun as well. Remember that the Sun said, "Those *nayéé* [problems that arise from an imbalance] are my creation."⁴⁴ The forces and the energy that a person uses to produce *nayéé* are from the sun, the air, the water, as is the energy to protect from those *nayéé*.

Thus the male aspect—the Sun—is both male and female by virtue of providing the energy for protection from *nayéé* (male) and for growth and creative aspects (female).⁴⁵

The second aspect of *Sá'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó*, its existence as a living cycle, can be seen in the passing of seasons or in the individual's life cycle of childhood, maturity, and with death, the passing back to the soil, air, and other natural elements of that individual's basic components. DB explains this more fully in terms of the diurnal cycle:

If you look at the times of day, it is this natural process of sunwise [clockwise] movement. At the east, where the sun first appears, there is the white air, the color right at dawn. As you move in a sunwise direction toward the south, that is midday with the blue air, which is the color when the sun is right above you. Evening twilight is at the west, where the sun sets and the air is yellow. And in the north, it is dark air, the color of night. As the sun continues its movement, it goes on to the east again and the cycle starts all over. Everything can be talked about like this, as this sunwise cyclical movement.

The passing of dawn into midday is a good example of the third and fourth aspects of *Sá'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó*, namely, that all things interconnect, and that, through this interconnectedness, all things cycle into all others. The times of day, for example, are not discontinuous, but are literally in a state of becoming each other, as one time cycles into another. The individual is no less "well-connected"—but is inseparable from, and cycles into and back from, the mountains, earth, air, and all other things. DB explains these aspects more fully in the following example:

Every air cycle is connected to all of the other [cycles] and is connected to your mother and father. During the nine months of gestation, you were raised in the daily cycles of the white, blue, yellow, and black airs, and in the 12 airs that your mother was breathing. Your father also was raised with breathing those 12 airs, so his offspring and his fluid came from those air cycles. You were raised with those airs all during the nine months [of gestation] and after you were born.

As dawn interrelates with the sun, earth, and other times of day, so too are humans deeply integrated with everything around them. They are literally the air cycles (cycles of the sun, the earth, or other natural elements) in which they live.

Sá'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó is also the continuous cycling of male and female into each other. Consider, for example, the inherent balance in daily activities: the protectiveness (or maleness) of a night's rest cycles into the fruitfulness (or femaleness) of a productive day's labor. As DB notes, if one were to work incessantly, exhaustion would force one to replenish one's strength through sleep. Likewise, rest without labor would result in a lack of food, shelter, and fulfillment, without which the individual would eventually, as DB also explained, return to productive (female aspect) activities. And this cyclical alternation between male and female is inherent to the individual, as HA explains:

We all possess both masculine and feminine characteristics in our body. For example, in a tragic situation, being a man [*sí*], the female characteristics are elicited. The same is true for the woman. Some situation happens and it elicits the male, and she acts like a man. For that reason, because you need both, you have male and female characteristics.

Similarly, DB notes that because both male and female exist, each has the other into which it can cycle and by which it can be balanced, and the cyclical movement of Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó can continue uninterrupted.

The implications of the above for trait-based definitions of nádleehí are significant. As I noted earlier, proponents of the four categories generally focus on a few isolated features of nádleehí (and of those who may be similar), such as dress and occupation, to designate who is or is not a berdache, person of alternate gender, gay, or two-spirit. Consequently, the categories consistently presuppose that both the trait and the aggregate of the traits—the individual—are not interconnected with the universe.⁴⁶

But such a conceptualization of trait and individual is at odds with many Navajos' understandings.⁴⁷ Reichard has previously alluded to this, noting that in general Navajo categories are not based on the "unique, the distinctive," as are many Euro-American classifications, but "on the inclusive" (1944:4).⁴⁸ In discussing berdache traits DB clarifies this inclusiveness:

So with nádleehí, like the clothing and stuff, that is so artificial, so why make a big stink about it? If you were to look at that person, at all the natural processes [such as the air, sun, etc.] interconnecting to him, that alone would fill up books and books. Then you get to this one part, this artificial part about his clothing. In a drawing of him as all of his interconnections, you'd have to magnify that artificial part a million times even to see it.

Thus, an understanding of nádleehí, if limited to the categories' selected traits, is very incomplete. To extend DB's analogy, one or two commas have been mistaken for the entire library. By removing the traits from the cultural contexts, one cannot assess a trait's specific meaning, the various meanings of the term *trait* (if it is culturally relevant at all), or the different ways in which people construe the individual in relation to traits. As DB explained it to me, the individual is seen as "the unique configuration of all natural processes coming into her or him," not as a handful of traits.⁴⁹

The categories also err in their determinations of maleness (or masculinity) and femaleness (or femininity). Each category assumes that masculine and feminine are constants; thus one can say with certainty that a male with a woman's mannerisms is exhibiting "feminine" behavior. The existence of everything as both male and female, with male and female cycling into each other, however, suggests that masculine and feminine are not as completely separate or mutually exclusive as is usually assumed. As DB explained, the Sun's energy gives the strength to develop protection (male) and to undertake creative, fruitful activity (female). The Sun is not so much a distinctly male or female natural process as it is both. Given that both male and female are ever-present, a gender valuation of masculine versus feminine will generally reflect the perspective of the observer rather than some absolute value. HA further elaborates on this:

Male and female—it depends on the situation of which one it is that you are talking about. There are things that women do and men do, but that depends. . . . I had three sisters and one brother and I'm the oldest. Our mother died when I was nine, and my baby sister was ten months old. I had to take care of her, scrounge for cloth [for diapers], and had to learn to wash a baby. I pretty much had to take care of the kids like I was their mother. . . . When I got married . . . my wife asked me to do other things around the house, so I did them. . . . I never thought of these things as woman's work. It was survival.

In the above, HA performed what for some are women's tasks by cooking, cleaning, and washing. Yet each of these is also Sa'ah Naaghái—that is, the male principle of maintaining one's defenses. The food HA cooked builds one's immune system and protects against infection. And because male and female are intricately connected, the protection cycles into health and fruitful activity. Were HA's activities seen in acultural terms, as "a male doing female behavior," HA would be considered a male nádleehí. By seeking meaning in the interconnected situations—and specifically that of HA's family's need to survive—we learn that he does not belong to that category.

Because everything exists as both male and female, gender valuation to many Navajos is largely situational,⁵⁰ even when it appears in combination with seemingly fixed attributes such

as genitalia. While anatomy is often the basis for female or male social, familial, and kinship roles, from another perspective each sex's genitalia also belongs to the opposite sex. A Navajo cultural teacher elaborates on this point:

If you were to look at all of us, we are the balance [of male and female], and with *nádleehí* they are that balance too. Even the organs—at the tip of the penis is a little vagina [ureter], while on the vulva is a little penis [clitoris]. That is how it is said in Navajo. So you see both penis and vagina, but only one functions. It is like that in the hermaphrodite, too—you see both but only one functions.

This situationality of male and female challenges a key assumption made in the use of terminology like *berdache*, person of alternate gender, gay, and two-spirit. Since what is male or what is female may not be definite, there is no basis for determining whether the individual has the personality aspects, occupations, attire, and other features of only one gender or of both. As such, the “two” cannot be delineated from the “one spirit” or the person of alternate gender, *berdache*, or gay from everyone else.

Sáah Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhó also has implications for the assumption that male and female exist separately from each other, with each the exclusive converse of the other. Because the categories presuppose that male is distinct from female, the conflation of male with female must indicate a new class, and this has generated the proliferation of generalized terms such as *berdache* and the others. As we have seen, however, to many Navajos all things exist as both male and female; the mixing of genders is therefore not a criterion of demarcation but an attribute of similarity. According to DB, that one exists as both male and female aspects holds as true for *nádleehí* as it does for a mountain, a tree, a woman, or a man. He went on to note rhetorically, “Everything is two, so how can you have this as a third? You don't have man, woman, and another.”

Other ethnographic data also support the understanding of *nádleehí* in terms of male and female rather than as an additional gender. Hill (1935), for example, observed that a male *nádleehí*'s murder incurred the same blood payment as a woman's. Kinship terminology for *nádleehí* relies on the distinction between male and female, and a male *nádleehí* is referred to as “daughter-in-law” when introduced to her partner's parents (PK, BH). Terms of endearment between *nádleehí* and their partners are based on female and male associations, respectively, and not on association with a third gender. And my *nádleehí* cultural teachers refer to each other using female pronouns, not neuter pronouns or pronouns specific to *nádleehí*.

These are, of course, only general outlines; *Nádleehí* expressions of male and female are subject to context. For example, the use of female pronouns for male *nádleehí* and feminine behaviors are often restricted to *nádleehí*-only or *nádleehí*-sympathetic settings; otherwise *nádleehí* use masculine pronouns to refer to themselves. WA and TY explained that other-gender attire may be limited to Halloween or to “passable” androgynous clothing. And yet this, too, varies, according to PK: some do engage in such so-called overtly feminine behavior as wearing makeup and “being more flamboyant” in public situations. Attire and mannerisms are sometimes also influenced by normative standards—to some Navajos, certain body parts should not be exposed. In keeping with this, EB, a *nádleehí*, explained that she altered her dress and demeanor when visiting her grandmother.

Given this degree of variability, let alone major epistemological differences, the four categories are clearly insufficient to accommodate many Navajos' constructs. Although many Navajos may describe *nádleehí* in terms similar to “alternate gender” or “berdache” definitions, the construction, meanings, and interrelations of these traits and of their gender associations may arise from a very different set of understandings. While the four categories often allow scholars to isolate traits for analytical purposes, many Navajos understand traits only in the larger context. And while the four terms classify gender according to fixed-definition, noncontinuous categories, many Navajos know of masculine and feminine as a dynamic cycling of male into female, with its valuation dependent on the setting. PK neatly summarized the salient issue: “Out here, you don't have the groups you have in the Anglo [cultures]. Time and events and classification

and categories, that's how you Anglos try to put everything. You get so caught up, you don't see people as humans responding to situations."

conclusions

The terms *berdache*, *alternate gender*, *gay*, and *two-spirit* are clearly inadequate, a shortcoming, I suspect, stemming from the continued uncritical reliance on unexamined assumptions about the centrality of gender and sexual practices. Sexual practices, for example, are often described in terms of sexuality, a modern invention; thus one could legitimately question the significance of sexual practices so construed for cultures with different historical constructions of identity and the individual. The concept of gender practices is no less problematic: the supposed discovery of third, fourth, and even more genders reifies the binary opposition of man and woman rather than disrupting it, and imposes gender constructs that may be inapplicable. And these notions of gender and sexual practices employ classificatory procedures at odds with many Navajos' understandings: both assume rigid, preset meanings for *masculine* and *feminine*, and both confer "identity" on a person on the basis of only a few traits.

And yet the current privileging of gender and sexual practices does not rest entirely with late 20th-century theorists and ethnographers. The proponents of the categories are heirs to a history of casting and recasting gender and sexual practices as the central concerns. *Berdache* was used by explorers and missionaries to point out the supposedly perverted gender behaviors ("men debased to women's occupations") and unnatural sexual practices ("sodomy and nefarious practices") (Katz 1976:288–291). Such notions of berdache deviance have tainted modern descriptions as well, as in Devereux's depiction (1937) of the Mojave *alyha* and *hwame*.

Most recently, gender and sexual practices once considered unnatural or debased have become a source of identity and community. Indeed, many involved in berdache studies identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or gender-radical. I, for example, choose women as sexual partners and play at androgyny. Thus, the very concepts by which *nádleehí* and others have been described historically are often personally salient to those researching berdache today. Little wonder, then, that gender and sexuality have been reissued in the latest categories—"gay" works well for those seeking recourse against homophobia; "alternate gender" resonates deeply for those who find the binary gender system rigid and oppressive; and in challenging colonialist discourse, "two-spirit" gives voice to those whose sexual and gender practices have been vilified or appropriated, and perhaps to others seeking their own particular voices.

In conclusion, gender and sexual practices have occupied our attention for so long that they have come to seem natural in the berdache studies landscape. The relationship of these constructs to historical and personal contingency and their influence on the ways in which a *nádleehí* is seen, recorded, and depicted have become invisible. This, I contend, has reduced the value of the categories for research and has obscured the epistemologies of other cultures. While part of *nádleehí* identity may indeed lie in gender and sexual practices, it is time to ask what else may be salient. Future work should begin with attention to the history of specific cultures, the exploration of multiple systems of meanings (as in other interpretations of Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó and *nádleehí*), and the identification of culturally specific and relevant constructs. Such a particularistic focus does not preclude cross-cultural research; indeed, it should enhance intercultural comparison by ensuring that research proceeds from culturally valid classifications. With locally salient meanings finally reinserted, new ways to organize the discourse can emerge, ways that take the analysis beyond gender and sexual practices and redefine the discourse itself.

Acknowledgments. Funding for the research came in part from a National Science Foundation (NSF) Dissertation Improvement Grant, an NSF Facilitation Award, a Sigma Xi Grant-in-Aid of Research, a Northwestern University Alumnae Fellowship, an Eleanor Association Fellowship, and a Northwestern University Dissertation Year Grant. I was greatly aided by the reviews and comments of Ann Wright, Laura Helper, Oswald Werner, Derek Milne, Niko Besnier, and by the comments of three anonymous *AE* reviewers. I remain responsible for any errors and oversights that may remain.

1. I use the term *Navajo* rather than *Diné* (a Navajo word for the people) for several reasons. First, the Navajo Nation refers to itself as *Navajo*. Second, the term *Diné* is less well-known. Third, when I asked one of my cultural teachers about the preferred term, I came away with a sense that *Diné* might have a slightly more restricted meaning in some contexts, and that it could refer only to men.

2. My use of the term *traditional* may be objectionable, and can wrongly suggest that Navajos are divisible into some sort of static, homogeneous “traditional” group as opposed to one which has changed over time, adopting various aspects from other cultures. I do not wish to convey this idea; rather, many of my Navajo cultural teachers use the term *traditional* to signify times perceived as less influenced by Euro-American and other cultures. Also, since Navajo plurals are generally indicated by context or the associated verb, I do not pluralize *nádleehí*.

3. I limit the critique to the four most frequently encountered concepts. *Berdache* has long been used to describe *nádleehí* in cultural trait lists, anthropological writings, and elsewhere. *Alternate gender* has garnered increasing support in a variety of scholars’ works. *Gay* was made more widely known by Williams (1986). The fourth is the most recent to gain acclaim. Following two Wenner-Gren conferences on *berdache*, many of the attendees called for abandoning the term in favor of *two-spirit* (Jacobs and Thomas 1994).

Other classifications exist as well. For example, Money considers *nádleehí* to be a kind of “gynemimetic,” or an individual who “change[s] from he to she,” but avoids genital surgery so as to live “full-time as a lady with a penis” (1988:98). Greenberg uses *berdache* to describe “transgendered homosexuality,” or an individual who “relinquishes the gender . . . ordinarily associated with his or her anatomical sex and lays claim to the gender associated with the opposite sex” (1988:40). Transgendered homosexuality is not restricted to North American Natives—Greenberg includes examples from Central and South America, the East Indies, Asiatic peoples, and so forth (1988:57–62). Herdt (1991a, 1991b) also relies on a concept of “transgendered homosexuality” in his critique of Devereux’s description (1937) of the Mohave *berdache*, known as *alyha* (males) and *hwame* (females). Herdt, however, moves beyond gender shifting, adding, “I suspect that the erotic is the royal road to understanding cultural ontology in many times and places. . . . To view the erotic in its social tradition is to see its part in the whole, that is, to recognize that homosexuality is not reducible to sex acts or to cultural meanings” (1991a:487–488). On the basis of this approach, Herdt suggests that “these characteristics [specific sexual practices] support an ontological theory of the *berdache* as represented primarily by its erotic nature. For the Mohave, this erotic nature could be expressed in and only in gender transformation of social role and sexual nature” (1991a:497).

Many of the criticisms presented in the essay apply to these categories as well. Reliance on broad cross-cultural categories overlooks the culture-specific meanings; the focus on gender assumes that gender is conceptualized, enacted, and partitioned in the same ways universally; the various cultures are lumped together on the basis of a few traits; generally, Western categorical constructs such as erotic, gender, and the like are privileged over indigenous cultural constructs and epistemologies without attention to their saliency. Both Herdt (1991a, 1991b) and Greenberg (1988) acknowledge several of these limitations of cross-cultural research.

4. My critique of the work of Thomas, himself a Navajo, could be interpreted as overlooking an emic perspective, and in a sense this may be the case. But his use of “gender” without attention to its cross-cultural relevance suggests a reliance on categories and concepts that may be locally irrelevant.

5. The reliance on Native explanatory models has had a curious trajectory in the hands of postmodernists and others. Initially it was celebrated as a means to address the “crisis in representation” (Marcus and Fisher 1986) in which “grand theories” and “the hegemony of objectivity” became suspect and were seen as constrained and determined by “a tendentiousness that is . . . based in any major division of power, any axis along which power differentials are organized and distributed, such as race and gender” (de Lauretis 1990:128). But Native voices were not heard for long. Weston (1993a:6) notes that postmodernist theories describe the individual as both a passive consumer of power (as de Lauretis indicates) and as resisting such power axes (e.g., Butler’s 1990 description of drag “gender performance” as undermining the coherence of anatomy, gender, and desire). In either case, the “native’s” experiences and explanations are often subsumed by the author’s concern with power relations and their effects. Abu Lughod’s method for “unsettling the culture concept and subverting the ‘othering’ process” illustrates this particularly well, which she explains as the “crafting, reconfiguring, and juxtaposing [of] these women’s and men’s stories to make them speak particularly to my concerns and those of my audience” (1993:13, 16). She rationalizes her use of others’ words for her own purposes by noting it is only “a false belief in the possibility of a nonsituated story (or ‘objectivity’) [that] could make one ask that stories reflect the way things, over there, ‘really’ are” (Abu-Lughod 1993:17). It would seem that since an “objective” story cannot occur, one need not attempt even the slightest approximations, permitting researchers to exploit the natives’ words for analytical ends without attention to the speakers’ original intent. Or, as Mascia-Lees et al. point out, precisely when women

and non-Western peoples are beginning to “claim themselves as subject[s],” and so demand recognition, the “ontological status of their subjecthood”—recognition that their realities are “really there” and can be, at least to a certain degree, ascertained and acted on—is refuted (1989:15). Indigenous and other voices are thus once again muted in favor of theoretical orientations.

In terms of my position, I see neither objectivity nor relativism as absolutes or as entirely attainable; rather, both are necessary, each providing a balance to the other (cf. Knauff 1994). The inability to achieve either completely should not excuse researchers from attempting description of others, or from considering at length the individual, societal, and larger issues (such as racism, poverty, and historical events) impinging on ethnographic assessment, analysis, and representation. As I explain later, that the particular Navajo worldview I describe is significantly context-sensitive does not make it entirely unknowable or render it invalid as an explanatory model.

6. In using this quotation, I do not wish to misrepresent my position on scientific inquiry and method. I see in Halperin’s quote a critique more of “scientism” than of science itself. I concur with Paul Roscoe’s assessment that the “scientifically inclined” conflate science with positivism, and, in so doing, erroneously suggest that science seeks “truth” (as opposed to validation); posit “an Order of Nature . . . in which entities are wholly governed by a transspatial, transtemporal order of forces or relationships” (as opposed to being governed by quantum physics, in which “no law can ever apply to all space and time”); and ignore the constructed nature of categories (as opposed to science’s frequent recognition of its own constructions) (Roscoe 1995:496–501, 505, n. 15).

Although I emphasize throughout notions often associated with “anti-science”—such as the processual nature of identity, the need for contextual understandings, and a deconstruction of accepted categories—I arrived at this perspective using scientific method, seeking as far as possible an approximation of the various meanings and experiences of *nádleehí*. I asked *nádleehí* first about the relevance of “homosexual” to their identities, and found it in many ways invalid; subsequent inquiries about “alternate gender,” “berdache,” and “two-spirit” were equally problematic, requiring new guesses at the meanings of *nádleehí*, exploration of alternative hypotheses (such as Navajo Creation teachings, semantic domains, and a specific worldview), and “modification of interpretations in terms of subjectively perceived consistency and problematcity” (Roscoe 1995:496). But the use of scientific methods to arrive at rather relativistic conclusions should not be surprising. As Roscoe points out, scientific method is no different from interpretive anthropological methods: both begin “with an initial guess about the meaning . . . move to procedures for ‘validation,’ and finally move back to a more developed understanding . . .” (Roscoe 1995:496, 497).

7. See, for example, Blackwood 1988, Carrier 1980, Devereux 1937, Forgey 1975, Jacobs 1968, Katz 1976, Kessler and McKenna 1978, Martin and Voorhies 1975, and Whitehead 1981.

8. The reliance on supracultural traits is similar to componential analytical methods, in which specific atomic components (such as generational level or sex in kinship studies) comprise a metalanguage. The terms of this metalanguage (much like the berdache traits) supposedly can be applied to any culture, regardless of a linguistic equivalent in the culture(s) under study (Goodenough 1972:229; Lyons 1977:318).

9. Halperin’s work is particularly instructive on this point. He states, “But redescribing same-sex sexual contact as homosexuality . . . effectively obliterates the many different ways of organizing sexual contacts and articulating sexual roles that are indigenous to human societies—as if one were to claim that, because feudal peasants work with their hands and factory laborers work with their hands, feudal peasantry was the form that proletarianism took before the rise of industrial capitalism” (Halperin 1990:46). The same could be said of the other berdache traits and those associated with the other categories considered here. Similar behaviors do not automatically imply similar meanings.

10. De Lauretis (1990:133–134), among others, notes how the interplay of race, gender, and class variably define an individual’s identity, so that these concepts must logically be bound by the individual’s specific experiences. For example, a Euro-American woman may have a very different sense of what it means to be a woman than, say, an African American woman. See also Weston’s insightful description (1993a) of gendering practices among lesbians, illustrating how the larger contexts of ethnicity, age, physical build, socioeconomic status, bigotry, and so on confer different meanings on a single feature. Weston also explains as well that an individual’s own “gender” meanings can vary: “However carefully crafted a lesbian’s presentation may be, once she brings it out into the street, that presentation can be jarred into a different interpretive framework by the teenager who throws a rock at her and calls her ‘dyke’ ” (1993a:14).

11. Halperin provides an insightful critique of this approach:

For so long as sexuality, like sex, was thought to be rooted in nature, historians and anthropologists guided by that assumption were bound to unearth merely different “attitudes” to or “expressions” of sexuality—historically or culturally variant responses to the universal “fact” of sexuality, local improvisations on nature’s unchanging theme; that theme, moreover, regularly turned out on inspection to be a remarkably familiar one, uncannily recapitulating (and thereby reaffirming) traditional categories and experiences. [1990:7]

12. Roscoe partly defends his linking of Euro-American gay practices with earlier (and present-day) Native American practices by explaining that

Symbols derive meaning from social contexts, but the play of meaning is not limited to the context in which the symbol was first created. A thought, a concept, any signifier can escape its context and disseminate through references and citations across endless texts and historical documents to be given meaning again—rethought—by another individual in another context. [1988:15]

Thus “gay” need not be restricted to the cultural and historical contexts from which it has emerged; but without the cultural and historical contexts of its first occurrence it is difficult (or perhaps impossible) to ascertain whether it retains its original meaning in subsequent contexts.

Boswell errs in a similar fashion, stating,

Even if societies formulate or create “sexualities” that are highly particular in some ways, it might happen that different societies would construct similar ones, as they often construct political or class structures similar enough to be subsumed under the same rubric (democracy, oligarchy, proletariat, aristocracy, etc.). [1990:35]

The advantages of being shorn of cultural and historical contexts become apparent: just as another culture’s social organization can be labeled according to such present-day classifications as “democratic,” so people’s sexual practices can be recast in current terms such as *homosexual* or *gay*.

13. Although the discussion has focused on the implications of sexuality contained in the term *gay*, it would be wrong to suggest that this term is solely about sexuality. Herdt and Boxer provide a concise summary of the other connotations contained in the term:

“Gay,” in other words, represents more than a sexual act. . . . It signifies identity and role, of course, but also a distinctive system of rules, norms, attitudes, and, yes, beliefs from which the culture of gay men is made, a culture that sustains the social relations of same-sex desire. [1992:5]

14. Other problems are implicit in the reliance on sexuality. Padgug notes that recent sexuality classifications treat “sexuality [as] a separate category of existence,” one that operates independently of “other spheres of reality. . . . Such a view necessitates the location of sexuality within the individual as a fixed essence, leading to a classic division of individual and society” (1979:8). Although I do not describe the matter at length, DB points out that many traditional Navajos understand the universe as exquisitely interconnected, with the individual literally inseparable from the mountains, the sky, the earth, and all other natural phenomena. To ground the definition of *nádleehí* in sexuality presupposes that the individual is independent of these interconnections and overlooks the highly integrated nature of the individual’s existence.

Present-day sexuality classifications also rely on a split between subject (such as *nádleehí*) and object (the subject’s partner) (Herdt 1991a:501). Additionally, the subject’s “deep nature” can be discerned through knowledge of the object’s anatomical sex—that is, whether this is the same as or different from that of the subject (Herdt 1991a:501). The same assumption underlies the incorporation of *nádleehí* into sexuality: in looking at male *nádleehí* (subject), the researcher learns that their partners (objects) are also male, and thereby grants *nádleehí* “homosexual” status. Here again, however, many Navajos’ ideas of interconnectedness and cycling suggest otherwise. Elsewhere I describe how *nádleehí* and “straights” are simply the ongoing cycling of the universe, in which each cycles into the other (Epple 1994). And, as will be discussed shortly, the individual is a composite of these interconnections, not determined by one aspect (such as sex of the sexual partner).

15. Although both authors acknowledge differences between Euro-American and Native American meanings of *gay*, they clearly conflate the meanings for their political and personal purposes. It is little wonder that Jaimes, a Native American woman, objects to such perspectives: “Particularly offensive have been non-Indian efforts to convert the indigenous custom of treating homosexuals (often termed ‘berdache’ by anthropologists) as persons endowed with special spiritual powers into a polemic for mass organizing within the dominant society” (1992:333).

16. I use the phrase “earlier times” to refer to a time when Navajo cultures were less influenced by Euro-American aspects. Many of my cultural teachers spoke about time in this manner. The category is fraught with problems such as an assumed homogeneity of practices in these so-called earlier times, but it does avoid the Eurocentric delineation of pre- versus postcontact.

17. I concur with Halperin’s assessment of the prominence afforded sexuality:

If there is a lesson that we should draw from this picture of ancient sexual attitudes and behaviors, it is that we need to decenter *sexuality* from the focus of the cultural interpretation of sexual experience. Just because modern bourgeois Westerners are so obsessed with sexuality, so convinced that it holds the key to the hermeneutics of the self (and hence to the social psychology as an object of historical study), we ought not therefore to conclude that everyone has always considered sexuality a basic and irreducible element in, or a central feature of, human life. [1990:242]

18. For example, BH and PA were adamant that they did not identify with “Anglo homosexuals”; nevertheless, they referred to themselves and peers as “gays.” PK also noted, “Anglo gays screw each other, but for two *nádleehí*, that relationship is forbidden”; she nonetheless referred to herself and other *nádleehí* as “gay” or “queen.”

19. The phrase “traditional Diné scholar” refers to Navajo (Diné) individuals who are particularly knowledgeable about Navajo worldviews. I have borrowed the term from a Navajo Community College project in which *hataatíí* (sometimes glossed as singer or medicine person), traditional and contemporary Diné scholars, and others developed the “Diné philosophy of learning,” an extensive exegesis of Navajo knowledge systems (Navajo Community College 1992). I was fortunate to work with three participants from the project, MB, DB, and HA.

20. The meanings Navajo attribute to *gay* may arise from the distinction between “real” and “pretend” *nádleehí*, with *gay* or even *queer* sometimes used by non-*nádleehí* Navajos to refer to “pretend *nádleehí*.”

21. Two nádleehí's experiences when they were growing up illustrate this further. PK's family is rather "traditional" and gives her extensive support: when young, she slept with the female children and was never discouraged from pursuing gender activities associated with females. Her partners were treated as sons-in-law by her parents, her father told her about Navajo traditional teachings on nádleehí, and so forth. In contrast, the devout Christian parents of another nádleehí kicked her out of their home when they found out she was "gay." The tensions were so severe that when a newspaper article dealing with AIDS awareness mentioned her name, she spent several days in another town to limit family contact.

22. The sources for Western ideas of gay identity are numerous. The nádleehí I know, for example, watch a great deal of television and frequently rent gay and lesbian videos. In fact, RN keeps me apprised of the best places to get films, which ones are worth viewing, and so forth. Additionally, PK noted that the queens travel frequently to nearby metropolitan areas such as Albuquerque, Phoenix, and Denver to take in gay bars, pick up sexual partners, and socialize. In doing so, they encounter and adopt aspects associated with Euro-American gay and gender practices. For example, the so-called berdache trait of cross-dressing has expanded beyond wearing women's clothing to include the use of makeup, fingernail polish, feminine hairstyles, and so forth, particularly in settings sympathetic to nádleehí.

23. The avoidance of other nádleehí appears to be somewhat akin to incest taboos. With less cultural support for nádleehí, however, some nádleehí overlook this restriction. This, combined with several other developments (such as borrowing from Western gay practices and increasing intolerance), may lead to the adoption of sexuality-based identities by more nádleehí. Some may increasingly coalesce around the very things for which they are being oppressed—sexual practices and other-gender behaviors—as have many modern Western gays and lesbians.

"Traditional" cultural values of nádleehí vary, as is illustrated by different clans' treatment of nádleehí. Where nádleehí were accepted, there seems to be some agreement on what their range of behaviors might include; examples given by PK, PA, and BH include mediation between men and women, performance of men's and women's work, some cross-dressing (although this varied by individual), and certain ceremonial dances (see also Hill 1935).

Thomas, relying on a shared set of "traditional" values (1993:6–8), has developed a continuum of variation in nádleehí, and provides further insight into the different ways nádleehí express themselves. To Thomas, traditional nádleehí live on the Navajo Reservation, live with or near female relatives, are deeply involved with their extended families, perform ceremonial and domestic activities as an occupation, are rich in cultural terms, participate in ceremonials, possess extensive cultural knowledge, were educated on the Reservation, and identify with traditional nádleehí. Transitional nádleehí live both on and off the Reservation; maintain strong family ties; are secretaries, nurses, and teachers; have less involvement in ceremonial practices but retain a fair degree of cultural knowledge; are more Western-educated; and identify with Western gays and traditional nádleehí. Contemporary nádleehí have a small degree of Reservation contact and ceremonial and cultural knowledge and identify with Western gays and "two-spirits." Acculturated nádleehí, as the term implies, have lived off the Reservation for several generations, have little or no cultural knowledge, and identify exclusively with Western gays and "two-spirits."

24. I use the metaphor of soil and roots as a satirical comment on Roscoe's family tree of alternate gender and sexual practices, as well as on Columbus's so-called discovery. It is not meant to imply some single set of roots common to all lesbians and gays or that all Native Americans are grounded in the same "soil" of identity, experiences, or ways of knowing.

25. I combine the discussion on "alternate gender" and "berdache," since each places an emphasis on gender roles, and the term *alternate gender* is in some ways a refinement of *berdache*.

26. Martin and Voorhies (1975) were among the first to use a concept of "alternate genders," or what they termed "supernumerary sexes."

27. A comparison between the Laguna dancers and the Navajo nádleehí's participation in the Nine Night Ceremonial illustrates this further. In both situations, the dancers wear other-gender clothing, but the Laguna do not view their dance as part of a larger social role. For the Navajo nádleehí, however, the attire is a part of their alternate gender status, above and beyond the ceremonial functions.

28. Jacobs and Cromwell explain, "Different groups may have different criteria for gender determination; it is through the examination of labels attached to organized criteria that we can locate the range of human gender and sexual variation" (1992:49).

29. Although Besnier's research was among Polynesians, adequate parallels warrant use of his data. He notes that Polynesian kinship "is structured on the basis of a fundamental opposition and asymmetrical complementarity between male and female entities, which leaves no room for an 'in-between' category. . . neither does one find any overt reference to gender liminality in praxis" (1994:319). The same is true for male nádleehí, as I explain later; if they are accepted by their families, they are frequently treated as females in kinship reference and practices. In terms of the porosity of the gender liminal category, Besnier explains that "particular men may retreat out of gender liminality in the course of their lives [by marrying women], an occurrence that has "no counterpart in the grammar of gender: no boundary crossing ever takes place between men and women [i.e., a man does not become a woman or vice versa]" (1994:319). A similar observation can be made of Navajo practices. PK, BH, and PA described how adolescent "queens" are encouraged by parents to "settle down and have a family." Some of those who heed their parents are known as "less masculine" men or "straights" and, although married and sexually active with women, may later become the sexual partners of male nádleehí. That these individuals are no longer considered to be nádleehí is indicated by the change in descriptor (i.e., from "queen" to "straight") and by the generic view that a

relationship between a *nádleehí* and a “straight” is not incestuous. (In contrast, a relationship between two *nádleehí* is considered incestuous [Hill 1935].) If *nádleehí* in fact constituted a “gender” class, one would expect a similar phenomenon in the other genders—that is, that a Navajo man could become a Navajo woman or vice versa—but this is not the case. Although, as I explain later, “man” and “woman” are both comprised of male and female, with male and female cycling into each other, the social category of “man” is nonetheless distinct from that of “woman.” (See Epple 1994 for a more thorough explanation of this apparent paradox.)

30. The characterization of *nádleehí* as a third gender emphasizes many of the same features characteristic of “fairies,” or effeminate men, at the turn of the century. As Chauncey explains, among working-class men in New York City, “the fundamental division of male sexual actors . . . was not between ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’ men, but between conventionally masculine males, who were regarded as men, and effeminate males, known as fairies or pansies, who were regarded as . . . members of a ‘third sex’ that combined elements of the male and female” (1994:48). In both “alternate gender” and “fairy” classifications, gender is given primacy—the fairy was a “she-man”—with sexuality of secondary importance (Chauncey 1994:47, 80). Like *nádleehí*, fairies generally did not engage in sexual practices with each other but took on relationships with masculine men, who also engaged in sexual practices with women. Furthermore, the sexual partners of both *nádleehí* and fairies were (and in the case of *nádleehí*, are) not considered “different” because of their sexual relationships with the “alternate gender” or “third sex”; rather, they retained their status as masculine men (Chauncey 1994:66).

But the classifications ultimately rest on different epistemologies. The gender schemas among the working class differentiated sharply between men and women, treated male and female as absolute values, seemed to view the “fairy” as a gender distinct from man and woman, and so on. For these and other reasons, *nádleehí* and “fairy” are only superficially comparable categories.

31. As pointed out by a reviewer, “basketball superstar” often brings to mind an African American, thereby interjecting ethnicity into the gender analysis. As I have shown above, cultures (and by extension, ethnicities) figure prominently in the ways in which an individual constructs gender. To some the use of “basketball superstar” could suggest a glossing of African American gender constructs, an interpretation Murray did not intend.

32. Murray explains that the superstar’s feminine behaviors include “display/commodification of a skimpily dressed and widely fetishized body [and] frequent public embracing of each other” (1994:60).

33. Indeed, my own research was initially intended to rebut the homophobia of “the West” and, by looking to an alternate gender, to challenge binary gender systems.

34. Besnier’s comments on the “othering” of “gender liminals” is particularly incisive. He notes, “So characterizing gender liminality as something other than a third gender is not simply the result of the naturalization by Western ethnographers of gender as a uniquely dichotomous phenomenon, as is popularly maintained in many gender- and gay-studies circles. Indeed, the insistence on viewing liminal individuals as forming a third-gender category can be equally criticized as a Western romantic construction of the ‘Other’ as ‘different’ from a reified ‘Western’ view of sex and gender, which itself is in need of critical clarification” (Besnier 1994:320). For examples of additional “third genders,” see Herdt’s collection (1994).

35. The absence of *queer* from the list is intriguing. It is possible that the authors decided to avoid it given its frequently derogatory use. In my experiences among the Navajo, *queer* was not generally used by *nádleehí*, and, when other Navajos used it, the term had connotations of deviance.

36. Both Lang and Tafoya speak in generalizations—“Native American identity,” “Native American gender,” “tribal concepts,” and so on. These characterizations may have arisen from their close work with “two-spirits.” In many ways, “two-spirit” is a term of identity politics, in which differences are glossed so as to form a community for empowerment, social action, and acceptance, for which a unifying ethnic and gender identity would be essential.

37. This is not an easy issue and deserves fuller discussion. Perhaps those of us who engage in this terminological debate should be willing to countenance many contexts, and, within those contexts, different terms. Among some Native peoples, *two-spirit* is, at least for the present, one of the best options. For those who argue the finer points in journals and conference halls, a different set of terms will be necessary. Knauff offers an important caution, applicable to all who would undertake such debates: “Exploring cultural richness easily leads to endless relativity. It can also lead to blind empathy or uncritical sympathy” (1994:123).

The use of *two-spirit* as a generic term should also be seen in its larger context. As I mentioned earlier, the term was proposed as a replacement for *berdache* during a conference including Euro-American and Native American academics, as well as Native American “two-spirits,” “gays,” “winkte,” “*nádleehí*,” and others. The conference is to be lauded, as it clearly sought to explore issues of representation, “othering,” and “authority.” And it was out of these urgent concerns that *two-spirit* was proposed and accepted. But there must be ways of accomplishing these goals without losing analytical precision.

38. Given my primary Navajo cultural teachers—DB, HA, and MB, the last an Anglo woman well-versed in Navajo understandings—the presentation is a kind of pristine knowledge, one that traditional Navajo scholars like DB and HA have spent numerous years exploring and learning. Other Navajos have different ways of understanding and explaining the universe, and many are ignorant of traditional Navajo forms of knowledge.

39. It is inevitable that individuals have some essentialistic notions of themselves. Weston’s description (1993a) of lesbian gender practices suggests as much, as did *nádleehí* (PK, BH, EB) on occasion. Should

these findings be ignored simply because they are essentialistic, thereby mandating that all descriptions of reality be subjugated to the most current standard, that of nonessentializing? Not only would that preclude learning of other ways of knowing, but it imposes, yet again, a Euro-American, academically derived order on the world. See also Mascia-Lees et al. 1989 for a similar discussion on related issues.

40. Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó definitions can vary widely. Witherspoon (1975:75), following Haile (1938:31, n. 69), describes it in terms of inner (Sa'ah Naaghái) and outer (Bik'eh Hózhó,) forms; Farella (1984:181) discusses it as a kind of completeness; Reichard (1990:45) defines it as the "synthesis of beliefs" about the natural world and humankind; and Wyman (1970), among others, frequently glosses it as "long-life happiness." And yet, even a cursory look at Navajo teachings on Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó reveals that, despite different interpretations, the underlying principles are often the same: all things are male and female, the world is a cyclical process, and all humans are interconnected with their surroundings. For example, Farella notes that "Everything, as any Navajo will tell you, can be divided into male and female. . . . [R]ecall that *s'a naghái* [*sic*] is equated with . . . the male component within all of us (*bik'e hozho* being the female)" (1984:133, 170). Reichard learned from Singer of Rain Ceremony that Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó is a male-female pair (1990:310); Wyman describes it as "long-life boy" and "happiness girl" (1970:28); and Kluckhohn points out that chants, rivers, plants, and other items are arranged as male and female (1968:681). Matthews makes a similar observation: "There are many instances in Navaho language and legend where, when two things somewhat resemble each other, but one is the coarser, the stronger, or the more violent it is spoken of as male or associated with male; while the finer, weaker, or more gentle is spoken of as female, or associated with the female" (1897:235).

The cyclicity of Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó is apparent in the passing of seasons, as male (winter) cycles into female (summer). The Navajo hataaíí Slim Curly explained it thus: "Thereby the earth, when vegetation appears in the spring, becomes as a young woman clothed in a new dress, whereas harvest in the fall lets her appear as a declining old woman. White Shell Woman is, in reality, the earth which changes in summer and becomes young again, then relaxes or dies off in winter" (Slim Curly as cited in Wyman 1970:28). According to Wyman, Slim Curly "called the earth 'Changing Woman Happiness' [female aspect] for summer and 'Changing Woman Long Life' [male aspect] in winter" (1970:28). (Changing Woman and White Shell Woman are sometimes the male and female aspects, respectively, of the same natural process, according to DB.) Reichard (1990:47), Farella (1984:149) and Matthews (1897:34) heard and reported similar descriptions.

Interconnectedness is also evident in a range of Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó descriptions. Briefly, DB explained that the individual is inseparable from nature, from which that person receives guidance, thought, and all things necessary for life. For example, Wyman writes of Changing Woman Long Life and Changing Woman Happiness (i.e., Sa'ah Naaghái and Bik'eh Hózhó), "They can make conditions blessed before, behind, below, above, all around one everywhere" (1970:30). Reichard explains that in Navajo philosophy a human relies on "all beings in the sky, on the earth, in the waters, under the earth, and in the subterranean waters" to "make [her or him] one with the universe" (1990:49). The idea of being one with the universe was also identified by Kluckhohn, who stated that "everything in the universe is interrelated" (1968:679); by Farella, who described the view that such things as the Sun, Moon, and the times of day "transmit thoughts and feelings to a person" (1984:108); and by Witherspoon, who observed that an individual must "harmonize and unify" with Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó (1974:56).

Thus, despite how they are interpreted, the same principles underlie many descriptions of Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó. In other words, certain principles have remained fairly constant over time. Given their usage in explaining the individual's place in the universe, these principles may afford some particularly important insights into how many Navajos understand *nádleehí*.

41. A very clear example of how Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó interpretations vary is the Diné (Navajo) Educational Philosophy (DEP). While all versions of the philosophy have been based on Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó, the content has varied over the years. Initially, the DEP divided educational concepts and student "goals for living" into four parts of a cycle, corresponding with the four directions. MB and DB noted that while some found it easy to apply, others felt it was "too simplistic" and that it lacked the more profound elements of Navajo philosophies. Some also contended that the interpretation reflected the author's particular religious affiliation.

In response, a more abstract and less formulaic set of ideas was developed, dealing with the "natural process" of cyclicity and its inherent male and female aspects. (My research is derived from this version.) Most recently, the focus has shifted again, this time to emphasize *í'áá hó ájít'éegoo*, or, roughly, "It is up to the individual to determine one's own life course." The current DEP version rests on the abstract knowledge explored earlier, while seeking a model more easily understood and implemented by Navajo and non-Navajo faculty. Additionally, each version is affected by the College's mandates and goals, personalities, and so on.

Or consider the Navajo Diyin Dine'é (glossed as Holy People), which DB explains are known to some Navajos as "gods" while others describe them as "natural processes." And yet, as anyone who has spent much time on the Navajo Reservation knows, such variability is accepted: no single version of Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó is necessarily considered the only acceptable version. Indeed, Navajo ceremonial songs often end with the statement "they say," which I interpret as meaning, "This is one way of saying it." DB, for example, described his knowledge as coming from many places, such as the sun, the earth, and so forth. As such, it is a knowledge that has been around for a long time, a knowledge that is capable of giving rise to many different things, including interpretations.

42. For instance, DB and PK explain *nádleehee* as the universe's balance of male and female. As such a male *nádleehee* can have a sexual union with a male or a female, since in either case it will be a male and a female coming together (the maleness of a male *nádleehee* with a female sexual partner or the femaleness of a male *nádleehee* with a male sexual partner). DC and others contend that a sexual union of a male *nádleehee* with another male is a male-male union and is counter to the universe's balance of male and female. When I asked one *nádleehee* about this latter interpretation, she suggested that the speaker was biased because he disliked several of his son's friends who were queens. Clearly, *Sa'ah Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhó* can be used as an authoritative "truth" according to context. The intriguing aspect, however, is that the terms of discussion—the universal balancing of male and female—remain the same.

There are many other examples of the invoking of *Sa'ah Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhó* to interpret phenomena. When a local college was struck by lightning near the administrative offices, some interpreted it as a sign of imbalance specific to administrators; others saw it as an indication that the college overall needed balance; still others suggested that because another campus of the college was also struck, the two campuses needed to work toward greater harmony between them.

43. In relying on these principles (although they are presented through a Euro-American interpretation), I concur with humanistic approaches and no doubt open myself up to much criticism. Yet, other ways of knowing do have something to say (see Faris 1990; Turner 1996). Reducing them to religion (as has been done in the past) or to discourses of power (a more recent strategy) serves to promote Euro-American arrogance, leaves unexamined a highly valuable and insightful explanatory model, and ignores important information about how the world is understood to work.

44. Of the many examples of *nayéé* DB provided, two are the hole in the ozone, created by pollution in the desire for industrial profits, and high cholesterol, which individuals bring on themselves by "eating greasy foods all of the time." In several ceremonial and teachings the Sun claims at least one *nayéé* as his son (Haile 1938:97, 1981:188; Matthews 1897:113; O'Bryan 1956:81). Other *nayéé* are said to arise from the masturbation that occurs during the Separation of the Sexes (O'Bryan 1956:7). While many translate *nayéé* as "monsters," I prefer the definition "problems that arise from an imbalance" (Navajo Community College 1992:27).

45. An example perhaps more familiar to some is human chromosomes (a comparison suggested by DB). For example, on the initial level, there is a male individual who is comprised of genes from a male and female (i.e., his parents). In terms of the genes each parent contributes to him, these too arose from male and female, in that each parent is also comprised of the respective maternal and paternal genes. And so it goes through the generations—every individual is comprised of male- and female-contributed genes, with every female- (or male-) contributed gene itself derived from male and female. Everything in the universe is similarly comprised of multiple layers of male and female.

46. The understanding of the individual as interconnected varies among Navajos. It is more prevalent among those who live in more remote areas of the Reservation, those who spent less time in boarding schools, and older individuals.

47. And yet, for some Navajos, traits can play an important part that encompasses gender aspects. During a field trip to an off-reservation city, for example, three Navajo students were alarmed to see a male in drag. To them, the drag queen was clearly just a compilation of traits, a person who was not following set expectations of how a man should look. Their ideas of gender, at least at that moment, reflected a certain fixity of what is meant by masculine and feminine. When I suggested they see the individual as simply a balancing of male and female, however, they agreed that my interpretation was a valid one. One student explained, "He was just right there, right there going down the street. It was just a shock and I guess that's why I made such a big deal about it."

48. This is actually only one side of the matter. As I have explained elsewhere (Epple 1994), many Navajos view the individual as both inseparable and distinct. But in terms of the current discussion the individual's interconnectedness clearly challenges the atomistic nature of trait-based definitions.

49. Weston's look at the features of "butch" versus "femme" lesbians also illustrates the difficulties with trait-based analysis. For example, she describes a butch (a lesbian generally associated with more masculine demeanor or dress) who is fond of bubble baths, and a femme (a lesbian generally associated with more feminine mannerisms and dress) who hates high heels and finds men's clothing more comfortable and convenient to wear (Weston 1995:241–240). She concludes, "Trafficking in the abstractions of gender traits artificially isolates gender from class, race, sexuality, ethnicity, and context. . . . To grasp what's going on here, you need something more than gendered terminology, because forced dichotomies like butch versus femme do not accommodate multiple lines of identification" (Weston 1995:241–242).

50. But the very fact that male and female are both recognized suggests they are also distinct. For example, an elder Navajo advised one of my cultural teachers that washing certain women's garments was not appropriate for a man. Thus there is something known as work appropriate to women and men, respectively. The distinction, however, does not negate the proposition that each kind of work is also male and female at deeper levels, much as one could say an individual with an XX chromosomal arrangement is female, but at a deeper level is comprised of male and female (i.e., a father's and a mother's) chromosomes.

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submitted September 25, 1995
 revised version submitted July 16, 1996
 revised version submitted February 11, 1997
 accepted March 13, 1997