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The Berdache

American Indian Transgenders

by Roberta Perkins

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Thanks to Hollywooden westerns and novels set in the 'wild west' the popular image of American Indians is of savage, warlike, ultra-masculine, 'bloodthirsty redskins'. The evidence, however, also reveals that transgenderism in native America was at least as prevalent as in modern societies.

By and large in Native American societies berdaches were treated well, from high respect to nonchalant acceptance.

What is a *berdache*? It derives from the Italian word *berdascia*, which had its origin in the Arabic *barda*, meaning a male prostitute or catamite (kept boy). *Berdache* or '*bardash*' was the French derivative, said to be uttered first by Father Marquette during his exploration of the upper Mississippi region in 1671 when he noticed Dakota males behaving and dressing as women. "There is some mystery in this", he recorded, "for they never marry and glory in demeaning themselves to do everything that women do. They go to war, however, but can only use clubs, not bows and arrows which are the weapons proper to men. They are present in honour of the *calumet* (sacred tobacco pipe) and they pass for *manitous*, that is to say, 'for spirits'.

Long before Marquette's voyage Europeans arriving in America were astonished to find males living and dressing as women. On the east coast of Mexico transgenders were known among the Totonacs, and further north Huastec males, dressed as women, served as temple prostitutes. The Spanish conquistador, Cristobal de Olid, slaughtered a

community of Huastecs in 1522 because they kept such a temple.

A decade earlier, in Panama, Vasco Nunez del Balboa had Indians he suspected of being transvestites torn apart by his wolfhounds. Francisco de Orellana, on his epic voyage down the Amazon in 1540, named the river after a rumor of a tribe of warrior women whom he thought resembled the mythical Greek women warriors.

By the time of Marquette's observations it was pretty well established that the phenomenon of the *berdache* was widespread across both American continents. What was also apparent was that, rather than being shunned and ostracized, *berdaches* performed important sacred duties.

The French chronicler, Jacques le Moyne, during his voyage to Florida in 1564 came across transgenders in the Timuqua tribe, of whom he wrote: "When their chiefs go to war the hermaphrodites carry the food, and when any of the tribe die of wounds or disease they construct litters and carry the dead to the place of burial".

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In the southern half of South America transvestite shamans (tribal priests) were common. Any Mapuche (tribe) man in Chile who felt the calling of the machi (shaman) had to dress as a woman and act as women did.

Similarly, male shamans of the Puelche tribe on the Pampas and Tehuelche tribe of Patagonia were required to dress as women because spirits were more disposed to making contact with women and entering their bodies. Anthropologist Alfred Mettraux encountered cross-dressing males in the tribes of the Gran Chaco, Paraguay. "Berdaches were very common among the Mbaya (tribe)", he noted. "They dressed and spoke like women, pretended to menstruate, engaged in feminine activities and were regarded as the prostitutes of their village".

Not only males but also female berdaches were reported in South America. "In certain Brazilian tribes", writes Edward Westermarck in 1908, "women are found who abstain from every womanly occupation and imitate the man in everything, who wear their hair in a masculine fashion, who go to war with a bow and arrow, who hunt together with the men (and) each of these women has a woman to serve her and with whom she says is married (for) they live as husband and wife".

Among the Maracapana, Teque, Caracas and Pijao tribes of northern Venezuela "some men wore their hair shoulder length (like women), were sodomites, practised transvestism, avoided going to war and carried on the traditional tasks of women, such as spinning and weaving", Gregorio de Alba wrote.

In Colombia among the Chibcha or Muisca tribe of Bogota, according to Pedro Cieza de Leon, "every temple or chief's house of worship keeps one or two men, or more, according to the idol, who go about attired like women and imitate them in their manner, carriage and all else, almost as if by way of sanctity and religion". While the incidence of male or female *berdaches* was generally not very high, their presence in a large number of South American tribes was noteworthy.

If anything, *berdaches* were even more widespread in North America. They were found in nearly every tribe east of the Mississippi encountered by early explorers and colonists.

On the other side of the continent, most tribes in California had one or two *berdaches*. The Yuki of northwestern California tested their boys' gender orientation by placing them together with digging sticks and bows inside a circle of brushwood, which was set alight, and if the boy picked up a woman's digging stick instead of a bow when fleeing to safety it was assumed he was a potential *I-wa-musp* ('man-woman').

In the centre of the continent virtually every Plains tribe had at least one male berdache. They were generally accepted by their fellow tribespeople as the Indians believed, according to anthropologist Donald Forgey, that a person "is free to work out his inner satisfactions as he can without persecution from within, as society does not feel injured or endangered". He argues that in a warlike Plains Indian society with a high rate of premature male deaths, a woman who has lost a father, brother, husband and/or older son might subconsciously feminise a younger son in order to avoid experiencing further pain. But, others argue that *berdaches* emerged with a confused gender identity in the same way transgenders in western society do.

The Plains Indian societies, rather than cast out their 'misfits', provided them "with a supernatural explanation and justification for their condition", according to Forgey. The Omaha tribe told ethnographer Alice Fletcher that their *min-qu-ga*, or *berdaches*, arrived at their condition through a dream in which the Moon spirit appeared to the boy holding a woman's pack strap in one hand and a bow in the other, and if the boy reached out for the pack strap then he was destined to adopt a woman's role.

The Teton-Sioux were much more ambivalent towards their *winktes* ('as a woman') and while they were not ostracised, they referred to them as having "the heart of a woman", which was considered to be derisive.

On the other hand, the Cheyennes' *he-man-eh* ('half-man-half-woman') were treated as holy beings, for only they were thought to possess the power to negate the evil in enemy scalps and took centre stage in the scalp dance, holding the trophies on poles aloft for all to see the transformation.

Extraordinarily, a courtship dance was held after the scalp dance in which the *he-man-eh* blessed young couples with the increased power the berdache had absorbed by nullifying the enemy scalps.

In the Southwest (New Mexico & Arizona) berdaches were highly regarded in some societies, but cast out as alien exiles by others.

For the Navajo tribe of northern Arizona their *nadles* ('being transformed') were the living reflection of the bisexual godhead and treated as sacred persons, to the extent that one old Navajo admitted to anthropologist W.W. Hill that "they are sacred and holy; around the *hogan* (Navajo home) they bring good luck and riches and it does a great deal for the country if you have them around. When all the *nadles* are gone it will be the end of the Navajo."

Very different in attitude were the Pimas of southern Arizona, who felt that a *wi-kovar* ('like a girl') was a disgrace, but "except for ridicule", writes Hill, "no cure or coercion was attempted. The disgrace was only within the family, who bore it with quiet forbearance and resignation". Among the Pueblos of New Mexico *Berdache* (*ihamana* in the Zuni Tribal dialect) were neither viewed as sacred beings nor treated with disdain, but changing gender was simply accepted as inevitable for some people.

The Mojaves of western Arizona thought their *alyha* ('male *berdaches*) were a joke and poked good-natured fun at them, such as kicking a dog turd and asking an *alyha* if this was her child. More acidic derision was reserved for men who were husbands of *alyha*. But, towards their *hwame* (female *berdaches*) the Mojaves were extremely cruel and hostile. Ethnographer George Devereux cites the case of one *hwame* who was kept from the men's council and was not allowed to go to war, and was even raped at will, which eventually drove the poor creature to suicide by drowning in the Colorado River.

By and large in Native American societies *berdaches* were treated well, from high respect to nonchalant acceptance. Once the dominant Euro-American ideology imposed itself upon native cultures, however, the institution of the berdache was among the first customs to disappear.

There is much less evidence of Indian women identifying as men and taking on their role than male *berdaches* identifying as women. But, in battles with hostile Indians, European soldiers often reported women picking up the weapons of their fallen menfolk and fighting on. Therefore, they may not have taken the full identities of men, but they did learn masculine behavior, including the ability to handle weapons when necessary.

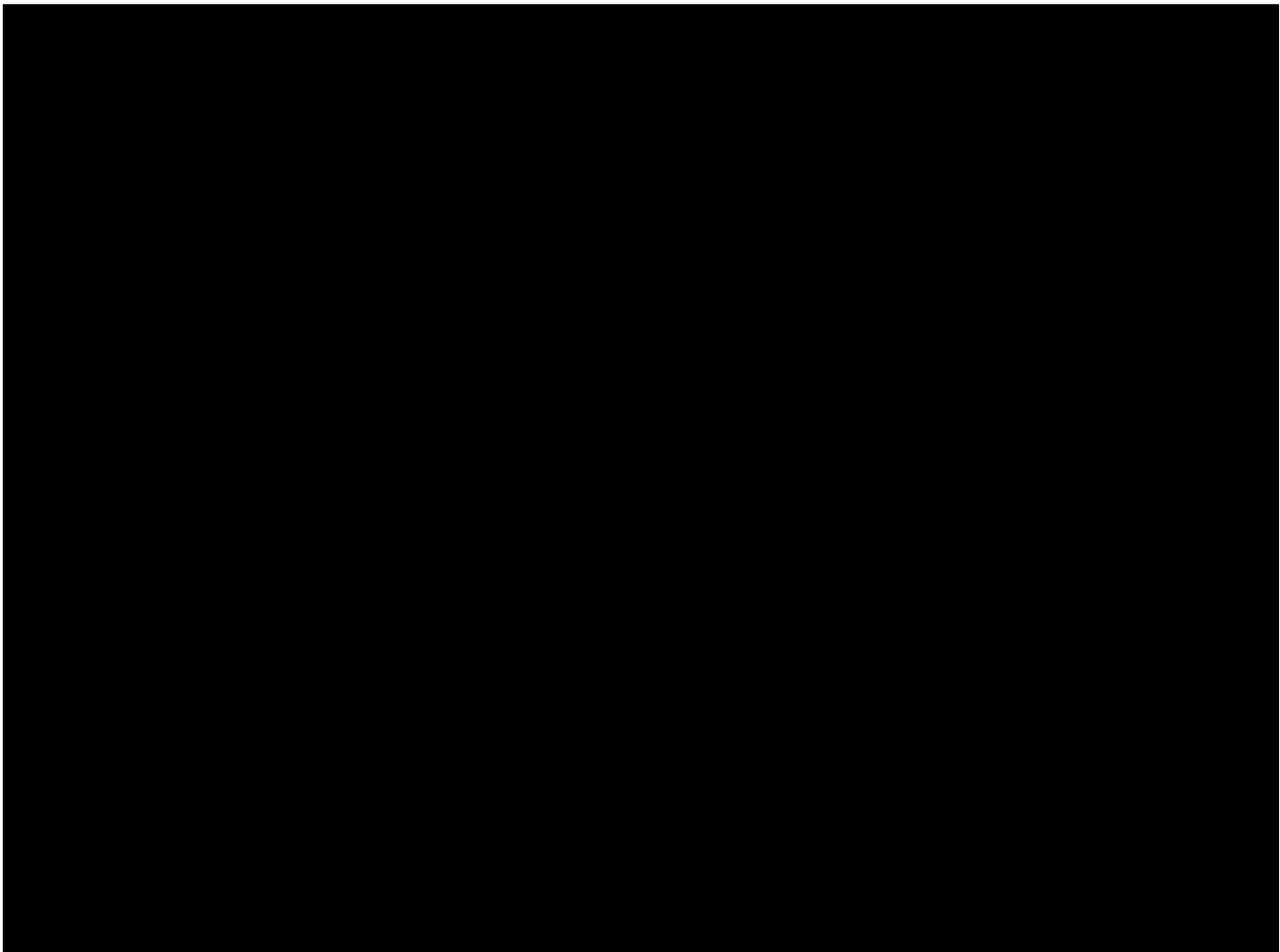
The best known of the warrior women is Lozen, sister of the famous Apache leader, Victorio. She fought alongside her brother in his battles against the White Men. When Victorio died in a fight with Mexican soldiers in 1880, Lozen took on the role of leader of his band of warriors.

When her group was defeated by an American army they were forced onto a reservation. However, when Geronimo's Apache band broke away from reservation confinement and went on the warpath in 1881, Lozen joined them and rode into battle alongside Geronimo, eventually dying of a wound sustained while fighting Americans.

References:

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An overview of historical and contemporary Native American concepts of gender, sexuality and sexual orientation. This documentary explores the *berdache* tradition in Native American culture, in which individuals who embody feminine and masculine qualities act as a conduit between the physical and spiritual world, and because of this are placed in positions of power within the community.



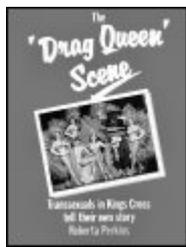
Roberta Perkins

Roberta Perkins established the Gender Centre (then known as Tiresias House) in 1983. She is also a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at The University of New South Wales and has conducted many government-funded research projects into prostitution. A transsexual herself, she has the confidence of the people she interviews; a sociologist, she has counselled transsexuals for a number of years; an activist, she has worked with them in the struggle to overcome the problems they face every day of their lives. Roberta is also the author, and co-author of five books and scores of journal articles on sex work research in Australia and has also taught Native American Studies for many years in Sydney



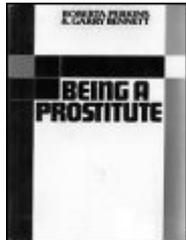
The Drag Queen Scene: Transsexuals in Kings Cross
Author: Roberta Perkins Publisher: Allen & Unwin (1983)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0868610474

Through a unique series of frank interviews, *The Drag Queen Scene* deals with the experiences of



male-to-female transsexuals who live and work in Sydney's Kings Cross area. It focuses on twelve people — showgirls, strippers, bar girls and prostitutes. Each of the twelve speaks for herself, providing first-hand insights into life and work in her world — a world a few people understand. Their stories uncover the raw reality behind the shallow popular view of the "Drag Queen". These revealing every-day accounts demonstrate how much accepted attitudes are based on ignorance,

prejudice and callousness. By offering the reader a rare opportunity to view a closed subculture as its participants see it, *The Drag Queen Scene* is an attempt to break down the resistance facing transsexuals, to influence changes in social attitudes and the law. In this book, twelve voices, hitherto silent, challenge the reader to question the stigmatising and ostracising transsexuals endure.



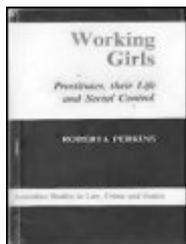
Being a Prostitute: Prostitute Women and Prostitute Men (with Garry Bennett)

Author: Roberta Perkins and Garry Bennett Publisher: Allen & Unwin (1986)

I.S.B.N.-13 978 0868616780

Constant media coverage and popular concern about prostitution, recent changes to legal and administrative regulations governing prostitution in its various forms in its several States, and the emergence of organised groups to represent the views and interests of prostitutes in public discussions and to influence policy formation ensure that the subject retains a high level of visibility and social significance. At the same time there have been remarkably few empirical studies of prostitution in Australia and our knowledge is largely confined to sensationalised reports of

criminal cases and media exposés. So a book giving detailed accounts of the perceptions and experiences of a variety of prostitutes, male and female, homosexual and heterosexual, of different ages and background, and covering the diversity of forms of occupational types and organisational settings of prostitution at the present time would seem to be timely.



Working Girls: Prostitutes, Their Life and Social Control

Author: Roberta Perkins

Publisher: Australian Institute of Criminology (1991)

I.S.B.N.-13 978 0642158765

From Abe Books:  This book has three objectives: 1. To demonstrate empirically that prostitutes are basically ordinary women with only their occupation distinguishing them from others; 2. To bring to the general public a balanced, well-informed view of prostitution, shed of its tawdry reputation; 3. To convince legislators to adopt a more practical method of dealing with prostitution.



Sex Work and Sex Workers in Australia

Author: Roberta Perkins

Publisher: University of New South Wales Press (1994)

I.S.B.N.-13 978 0868401744

From Google Books:  *Sex Work and Sex Workers in Australia* is one of the most comprehensive books on the sex industry. This book's main focus is on prostitution and it is broken down on many levels: female, male, transsexual, health care, oral histories, and foreign workers (e.g.. Thai). It is very easy to read and one leaves this book with an excellent history lesson as well as viewpoints from both men and women which balances this book.



Call Girls: Private Sex Workers in Australia

Author: Roberta Perkins and Frances Lovejoy

Publisher: U.W.A. Publishing (2007)

I.S.B.N.-13 978 1920694913

From Booktopia:  *Call Girls* casts a penetrating, red light gaze upon the upper echelons of the worlds oldest profession private sex workers who use the telephone as a means to solicit clients. Containing frank accounts from women working in the Australian sex industry. *Call Girls* puts a human face on this hitherto shadowy, clandestine world as it documents how many women became sex workers; run their businesses; maintain their health; and how the call girls work affects their relationships with husbands, lovers and families. Far-removed from the moralising, victim stereotypes and *Pretty Woman*-inspired fantasies which pervade popular culture, *Call Girls* places the world of the sex worker within social, political and legal contexts which will surprise and change the preconceived notions of many readers.

The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.