

**THE MYTH OF THE HETEROSEXUAL:
ANTHROPOLOGY AND SEXUALITY
FOR CLASSICISTS**

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Chamberlain: We belong to a sort of secret society, the Order of Chaeronea, like the Sacred Band of Thebes. Actually it's more like a discussion group. We discuss what we should call ourselves. "Homosexuals" has been suggested.

AEH: Homosexuals?

Chamberlain: We aren't anything till there's a word for it.

AEH: Homosexuals? Who is responsible for this barbarity?

Chamberlain: What's wrong with it?

AEH: It's half Greek and half Latin!

Chamberlain: That sounds about right.

Tom Stoppard, *The Invention of Love* (1998.91)

This is not an article on ancient sexuality. It is an article on how to *think* about ancient sexuality. In particular, it is an article on the widely differing systems that cultures throughout time and the world have used to classify people and their sexual acts.

Our own particular system divides people into two major classes on the basis of whether they have sex with others of the same sex or not (heterosexuals versus homosexuals). This is a surprisingly rare system

anywhere in the world and a comparatively recent development in the West.¹ The system shared by the ancient Greeks and Romans was quite different and divided acts and people on the axis of active versus passive.² Similar ways of categorizing sex are much more widely spread, both historically and anthropologically, but this system, too, is only one of many patterns to be found.³

The vast majority of classicists (as well as historians and anthropologists), when considering ancient sexuality (or any other part of culture), quite naturally assume that sex for the Greeks and Romans meant pretty much the same thing as it does for us, and so speak of “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality” in the ancient world.⁴ This, of course, has been the standard approach for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁵

We need to note, first off, that this is not such a bad assumption, either methodologically or ethically. It is basically a good idea to start off, at least, by assuming that other people are men of like passions with us (Acts 4:15). The opposite assumption runs the danger of orientalism, exoticism, *pensée sauvage*, and “They don’t feel pain like we do.” Of course, with that

1 Foucault 1985, Greenberg 1988, Halperin 1990, McWhirter, Sanders, and Reinisch 1990. J. Katz 1995 is especially refreshing.

2 For some overviews, see Housman 1931.408 n. 1 (= 1972.1180 n. 2); Dover 1973, esp. 148–49, 1978.16, 81–91, 168–70; Richlin 1992, esp. 131–39 (contra Richlin 1993, see n. 24 below); Veyne 1985.26, 29–30; Foucault 1985.46, 84–86, 210–11; Wiseman 1985.10–13; Halperin 1990, 1996; Winkler 1990; Parker 1996, 1997; Walters 1997; C. A. Williams 1999.18. Even Boswell: “This ‘penetration code’ . . . was clearly not related to a dichotomy of sexual preference, but to issues of power, dominance, and submission” (1990b.72).

3 The overviews of the classical Arabic active/passive system by Schmitt 1995.15–16 and Rowson 1991 are particularly useful for showing the close parallels to and interesting differences from Greek and Roman sexuality.

4 Despite much recent work, classics as a discipline is still unreflective on this point. Two recent illustrative examples among countless others. One is an introductory survey of Greek culture for undergraduates: Pomeroy et al. 1999.145–46. The other is a collection dealing directly with sexuality and the body: Osborne 1998, who argues in all seriousness that ancient Greek “homosexuals” must have found Riace Bronze B the hunkier on the basis of museum exit polls and Italian pornographic comic strips. Apparently all “homosexuals” at all times and in all places have the same tastes. Making the same argument for “heterosexual” males in just the last fifty years (Betty Grable to Kate Moss?) shows the flaws.

5 Earlier scholars often preferred to maintain a dignified silence on such matters, since Latin offered no decent obscurity. In some cases, however, their paraphrases show that they understood, and indeed took for granted, the Roman system of active versus passive. Cf. the clear comments of the younger Guarini (1521.17) or Vulpus (1737.60–61) on Cat. 16, or Forberg 1884.80, 82, 90 on Latin sexual vocabulary.

assumption goes the responsibility to be on the lookout for exactly those places where they are *not* of like passions. And, of course, the danger of the assumption is that it's very seldom true and never that simple. Laura Bohannan's "Shakespeare in the Bush" should be required reading for all classicists.⁶

The difficulties of studying ancient sexuality are shown by the extraordinary inability of many classicists, still, to perform even the most basic of philological tasks: figuring out what the words mean and what the text says.⁷ The reasons for this failure are many, some political, some personal. More important, however, is a somewhat understandable unwillingness to believe that the categories that rule our lives simply do not exist elsewhere and did not exist elsewhere. The principal obstacle that prevents us from an accurate understanding of the sexual lives and values of other peoples is that we *begin* the investigation with the assumption that their sexuality is the same as ours, that our sexuality is natural, is given, is the only sexuality there is. This failure is shared by some anthropologists, who ought to know better.⁸ Even with the best will in the world, which is not

6 Bohannan 1966: "Sometime . . . you must tell us some more stories of your country. We, who are elders, will instruct you in their true meaning, so that when you return to your own land your elders will see that you have not been sitting in the bush, but among those who know things and who have taught you wisdom."

7 Some recent Greek examples: among numerous misreadings, Thomas Hubbard (1998:51, 58–59) tries to make *καταπύγων* mean its exact opposite; he misunderstands *λαϊκάζω* (58), even though he cites Henderson (contrast Henderson 1991:153 and n. 12). Davidson speaks about the "bizarre sexual monsters called *katapugôn* and *kinaidos*" (1997:161), which he glosses as "sexual degenerates" (167). However, he refuses to discuss what *καταπύγων* actually *means*, and tries to fob off the reader with Liddell and Scott's Victorian dictionary entry "lecherous, lewd" (172). However, the entry actually begins "given to unnatural lust" (unaltered since the first ed. of 1843 and, in turn, taken directly from Passow), which might have guided him. While it is easy to see how a man conceptualized as essentially passive might also be thought weak in self-control, it is difficult to see why someone who was supposedly characterized by a mere "lack of self-control" (173; itself an idea taken straight from Foucault) should be called "a guy who takes it up the ass." It is an instructive exercise to compare what Sissa 1999 says Aeschines says with the actual text of *in Timarchum*. All three authors toss "homosexual," "gay," even "cruisings" about, but are strikingly economical with the Greek. See below, n. 28.

8 See, for example, the exchange of letters in *Man* about the Omani *xanith*, where the term "homosexual" is batted about as if it had a universal meaning: Wikan 1977 with Shepherd 1978, Feuerstein and Al-Marzooq 1978, Brain 1978, Wikan 1978, Shepherd et al. 1978, Carrier 1980. For similar errors in anthropology, see Werner 1979, Whitam and Mathy 1986, Weinrich and Williams 1991. See Weston 1993 for a very useful survey.

always the case, our habits of thought cause us to make errors about other cultures' sexuality. However, the inapplicability of our sexual categories to other cultures is revealed not only in the failure of anthropologists or historians to ask the most basic questions about other cultures but also by the occasions on which our questions have produced incomprehension, incredulity, or outright laughter.⁹ The joke of the missionary position is no joke.¹⁰

The purpose of this paper is not to outline the sexual systems of Greece and Rome but rather to eliminate some of the assumptions that may clog our minds and discourse.¹¹ I hope merely to do a little ground clearing. I want to look at the anthropological record primarily as a way of defamiliarizing ourselves with what we assume is normal, given, obvious, unquestioned, and commonsensical. Some of the theory and material will be familiar to a classical audience, some perhaps not.¹²

In what follows, I examine the anthropological concepts of *emic* and *etic*, which may help clarify our thinking and writing. After a scrutiny of the terms *sex* and *gender*, I look at several cultures that admit more than two biological sexes, then at some of the reasons for our reluctance to admit that different cultures have different ways of looking at sex. These reasons include the current fads of biological reductionism, sociobiology, and the search for a "gay gene." I conclude with an outline of the sex-gender systems of three cultures—the *hijra* of India, the Navajo, and the Mohave—whose multiple gender categories pose a challenge to the comfortable assumption of a universal hetero versus homo split.

9 Opler 1967.252: "Later, in fieldwork among Ute Indians of Colorado, this author's check on such topics [e.g., homosexuality] yielded amusement, disbelief, and counterquestioning on American urban culture."

10 E.g., Malinowski 1929.337–38: "Above all, the natives despise the European position and consider it unpractical and improper"; cf. Gregor 1985.32–33, Ford and Beach 1951.23–25.

11 Accordingly, a good deal of the standard bibliography is missing. Classicists are mentioned primarily when they illustrate a common type of conceptual error.

12 Davis and Whitten 1987 is an excellent bibliographical survey.

EMIC VERSUS ETIC

This goal is, briefly, to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise *his* vision of *his* world.

Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922.25)

In discussing another culture, two obvious points must be made. First, the words and categories of one language and culture may not translate directly into another. English *family* and Latin *familia* are markedly different in use and meaning: *familia* naturally includes (indeed primarily indicates) the slaves; *family* does not.¹³ The words are similar enough in semantic range that we can perhaps use English *family* as a calque of Latin *familia*, but if I say in English, "I had a member of my family tortured today," you can only think me an inhuman monster, whereas the same statement in Latin would only elicit the question, "What was the slave giving evidence about?"¹⁴ The second point is that, even within a language, some terms and categories are more fundamental than others. *Red* and *blue* are primary terms as well as primary colors; *desert-mist* and *fuchsia* are not.

I cannot give here any kind of comprehensive overview of the great essentialist versus constructionist debate.¹⁵ Indeed, at times, it seems less like a debate than a war (Skinner 1996 uses the same metaphor). Boswell 1990a.134 speaks of constructionism "wag[ing] a kind of guerrilla warfare." Dynes, in a vituperative article, speaks of "a battle in which only one army is engaged" (1990.217).¹⁶ Both accuse constructionists of attacking a straw man and of failing to define their own position with any rigor. The first charge is largely false, the latter is largely true.

13 See Rawson 1986, esp. 7, Bradley 1991.162–65, Dixon 1992.7–9 and 22–23, Saller 1994.74–101, esp. 74–76 and 82, Parker 1998.154–56.

14 Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 13.3. Boswell 1990a.143 uses the example of *familia* in an argument based on a rather naive misunderstanding of Whorf (a convenient treatment is to be found at Duranti 1997.52–53).

15 The metaphor of construction can be traced back to Ruth Benedict 1938 through the highly influential work of Berger and Luckmann 1966. For excellent introductions, see Vance 1989, 1991, and Morris 1995; see also the pioneering works of Weeks 1977, 1985, 1989, 1991, and Padgug 1979; also Gergen 1985, Caplan 1987, Greenberg 1988, Halperin 1990, Laqueur 1990, Stein 1990; more densely literary and theoretical is Butler 1993.1–55.

16 See also Boswell 1989.35, who claims that "no current historians *consciously* defend an essentialist point of view" [my emphasis]. Vance 1989.15: "Only those who depart from the dominant system have cause to label themselves."

What I can do, however, is examine briefly a single concept that provides a very powerful tool for the analysis of the claims of both sides. There is a great deal of misunderstanding of this emotionally charged topic. As the articles in a recent collection devoted to this subject reveal (Stein 1990), the constructionist position is consistently misunderstood by its opponents. It is also no less often misstated by its proponents. I wish to give as brief and precise a definition of the social constructionist position as possible. In a nutshell: social constructionism states (or should state) that social categories (here specifically sexual categories) are *emic* and not *etic*. These are terms from anthropology that are in turn derived from linguistics.¹⁷ They correspond to the distinction between the phon-*etic* level of a language's sound system and the phon-*emic* level. The phonetic level of a language (or of all languages) consists of all the possible sounds that can be made, down to the smallest variation. The phonemic level, on the other hand, goes no further than those distinctions in sounds that are significant in determining meaning. More precisely, phonemes are "the smallest segments of sound that can be distinguished by their contrast within words" (Ladefoged 1975:23). Words that differ by a single phoneme are called minimal pairs. On the phonetic level, English tends to aspirate its consonants, but this aspiration disappears after *s*. You can easily feel the puff of breath just by holding your hand in front of your mouth when you say "pin" and then "spin." In phonetic analysis, we have [p^hin] versus [spin]. But [p^h] and [p] do not form a minimal pair in English, since there are no two words distinguished by the difference, the way there are in Greek: φως, "light" versus πώς, "how?" On the phonemic level, however, the distinction between voiced and voiceless consonants in English means that /tin/ and /din/ form a minimal pair: thus /t/ and /d/ are phonemes in English, but [p^h] and [p] are not.¹⁸

There are many jokes that illustrate the differences that minimal pairs can make. In Japanese, for example, /s/ is always pronounced [ɕ] before /i/.¹⁹ A friend of mine was unable to convince her Japanese students that she wasn't just making up the difference to drive them crazy, until she told them of the important difference between "sitting on the chair" and

17 First formulated in Pike 1954/1967.

18 Slashes are traditionally used to indicate phonemic representations; square brackets indicate phonetic transcriptions.

19 I.e., [ɕ] is a phonologically determined (palatalized) allophone.

“shitting on the chair.” To give equal time to Japanese, which like Latin and Greek has a phonemic difference between short and long vowels, there is a popular joke about an American (of course) who is given the grand title of *shacho no komon*, “Assistant to the President.” All goes well until he introduces himself as *shacho no kômon*, “The President’s Rectum.” Ancient Greek had a phonemic distinction of pitch accent, and the joke was told for years about the actor Hegelochos who meant to say γαλήν’ ὀρῶ, “I see a calm,” but instead said γαλήν ὀρῶ, “I see a ferret.”²⁰

Four important facts must be kept in mind:

1) Phonemes exist only within a single language. There may be phonemes in another language similar to those of English, with considerable overlap, but only rarely will they have the same sets of features (as anyone who’s ever made a French /r/ knows) or occupy exactly the same position in the overall classificatory scheme.

2) Languages differ wildly not only in the number and kinds of phonemes the speakers recognize but in the features that distinguish phonemes. For example, ancient Greek distinguished aspirated from plain stops. We do not. Greek distinguished vowel length. We do not.

3) Because different languages draw the lines that separate phonemes in widely differing places, one language may lump together sounds that another keeps separate. That is, we as native speakers of a language fail to distinguish between sounds that differ on our sub-phonemic (i.e., phonetic) level. For example, Japanese speakers supposedly cannot produce the difference between /r/ and /l/.²¹

4) Conversely, one language may draw distinctions in sounds that the speakers of another language cannot even hear. For example, Malayalam divides our English /t/ phoneme in two: dental /t/ is a separate phoneme from alveolar /t/, e.g., *muttu* (dental) means “pearl” and *muttu* (alveolar) means “density.”

Thus a sound in one language may differ from a similar sound in another language in two different ways. It may differ phonetically, in its description. For example, Russian and English have /t/ as a phoneme. The Russian /t/ differs phonetically from the English (theirs is dental and ours is alveolar). But the Russian /t/ differs phonemically as well, i.e., in its structural

20 In a performance of Euripides’ *Orestes* (279). The joke is at Ar. *Frogs* 303 (with scholia), Sannyrion frg. 8, Strattis frgs. 1 and 80.

21 In fact, [r] and [l] are phonologically determined allophones.

place, for it contrasts (forms a minimal pair with) palatal /ɛ/: *mat* means “checkmate,” while *mat*^y means “mother.”

This linguistic model is also applicable at the cultural level, that is, to emic categories.²² Nor is a linguistic analogy idly chosen, for the intellectual heritage of social constructionism and most structuralist analyses can be traced in a direct line from de Saussure, to Boas, to Sapir, to Benveniste, to Foucault. Whorf’s famous formulation of the “linguistic relativity principle” deserves to be quoted at length (Whorf 1956.212–13):

Formulation of ideas is not an independent process, strictly rational in the old sense, but is part of a particular grammar, and differs, from slightly to greatly, between different grammars. We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language.

Let me repeat the four points on the cultural level:

1) Like phonemes, emic categories exist only inside of a single culture. I cannot, for example, in any meaningful way claim to be a shaman or a *berdache*.²³ Catullus was young, he was urban, he may even have been professional, but he was not a Yuppie any more than he was a Whig. That is, an emic category may fulfill the structural description of another culture’s

22 See Goodenough 1981.14–18 for a concise statement. See also Feleppa 1986, 1990, Holland and Quinn 1987, Eastman 1990.11, 25–27, 101–23, Bonvillain 1997.48–65, Salzmann 1998.39–65, 81–83. Other terms (focusing more on the hermeneutics of fieldwork) are “actor-oriented,” “experience-near/experience-far,” or the “*verstehen* approach.” Much-studied examples of emic classification systems are kinship, color, disease, and species terminologies. See Lucy 1992 for a complete survey.

23 For this sexual category in several Native American cultures, see below on the Navajo and Mohave.

concept, but that does not necessarily make the two identical or even comparable. Some of the errors caused by the desire to identify ancient sexual concepts with modern sexual concepts can be made clear by a pair of syllogisms: a man who penetrates a boy in the anus is a “homosexual”; a κίναϊδος is a “homosexual”; ergo, a man who wishes to penetrate a boy in the anus is a κίναϊδος. Well, no. A man who performs cunnilingus is a κίναϊδος; a κίναϊδος is a “homosexual”; ergo, a man who performs cunnilingus is a “homosexual.” Well, no.²⁴ Let us further note that this labeling is entirely monodirectional. Those who are fearless in calling, let us say, Sophocles a homosexual realize how absurd it would be to call, let us say, Oscar Wilde a κίναϊδος, and they never do. We need not go all the way back to Greece and Rome, fifty years or so will do. Those who toss “homosexual” about with gay abandon would shrink from applying to the ancients even slightly dated terms like “invert,” “sodomite,” or “Uranian” (except for Jenkyns 1980.284).

2) The lines that distinguish one category from another may be drawn on completely different axes. By the fifth time we make the qualification, “The Greeks hated homosexuality but only the passive form,” or “The Greeks mocked a man for being a homosexual, that is, a passive homosexual,” it ought to become clear that we not talking about homosexuality but about passivity.²⁵

3) An emic category may lump together what another culture keeps rigorously separate. From the Greek point of view, our emic category “homosexual” lumps together perfectly normal men who wish to bugger boys with disgusting κίναϊδοι who wish to *be* buggered by men.

4) Or else an emic category may separate what another considers a distinctive unity. From the Greek point of view, we make some sort of incomprehensible distinction between perfectly normal men who bugger boys and perfectly normal men who bugger women.

24 Here I am forced to disagree with Richlin (oversimplified by Hubbard 1998.48): “I will argue that ‘homosexual’ in fact describes, in Roman terms, the male penetrated by choice” (1993.526). However, that is neither what we mean by “homosexual” nor what the Romans meant by *cinaedus*.

25 E.g., Veyne 1985.30 on the Romans: “The passive homosexual was not rejected for his homosexuality but for his passivity.” Therefore, why persist in using the ethnocentric term “homosexual”? It is in fact a very useful exercise in reading articles on ancient sexuality simply to skip the word “homosexual(ity)” and see what results. Davidson 1997.168 speaks contemptuously of “that strange beast, ‘the passive homosexual’”; the confusion, unfortunately, is his.

For cultural systems at the emic level, what we are talking about are the distinctions in categories that an individual society itself makes.²⁶ Thus criteria that are of great importance to one society are not even recognized by others. Kinship systems are an excellent example: who counts as family, who is exogamous, and who is forbidden vary greatly from culture to culture.²⁷ If we apply our categories to a foreign culture, we are in danger of seriously misunderstanding it. The question in both linguistics and cultural analysis is, “What difference does it make?”

Within a given culture, emic categories are seen to exist on a more basic level than etic categories. They are the basic building blocks, the primary counters of daily experience. One common sign of an emic category is lexicalization, that is, “The Greeks had a word for it.” The Greeks—and the Romans—did not have a word for “homosexuality.”²⁸ “Homosexual” was not an emic category; it was not a category that Greeks or Romans found useful in organizing their world.

I can illustrate this point, and some of the common confusions about it, with an example from English.²⁹ English has no lexical item, no word, for “device run by electricity.” “Electronics” or other terms will not do since these include TVs, computers, etc., but ignore electric knives and electric trains. That is, we do not have a basic emic category that lumps together TVs and computers with electric stoves (but not gas ones), electric

26 See Duranti 1997.172–74 (however, the homology is between linguistic sounds and culturally specific systems of classification, not “human behavior”).

27 A simple example: Latin (like a number of cultures) distinguishes *amita* (father’s sister) and *patruus* (father’s brother) from *materna* (mother’s sister) and *avunculus* (mother’s brother). More precisely in anthropological terms, English has an Eskimo kinship terminology, while Latin has an Omaha terminology. For a convenient summary, see Peoples and Bailey 1997.215–22; for a survey, see Fox 1968. Now my mother’s sisters exist as real biological entities; this does not prevent the fact that *aunt* is not a useful (i.e., emic) category for Rome. Again, Boswell 1990a.144, 1990b.69–70 picked this example, but misunderstood. From our point of view, the Romans make a picky distinction, one for which we have no word. From the Roman point of view, we lump together things that ought to be kept separate (“Under what possible set of circumstances would I need a word meaning ‘sister of *either* my father or mother?’”).

28 Cf. Wiseman 1985.10–12 and Schmitt 1995.15–16, a useful overview of Arabic sexuality. As an example of this conceptual error, cf. Cohen 1991.176: “One statute disenfranchised any Athenian citizen who engaged in homosexual intercourse for gain.” But it doesn’t. It *couldn’t*. What would the Greek for “homosexual” intercourse be? Whenever one encounters the word *homosexual(ity)* (or more rarely *heterosexual[ity]*) applied to the ancient world, one should ask, “What does the text actually say?”

29 Boswell, among other elementary errors, confuses “word” with lexeme (see above, notes 14, 27). See Eastman 1990.112–13 for an overview of lexicalization.

staplers (but not mechanical ones), and battery-operated clapping monkeys (but not wind-up ones).

Now, obviously, we can formulate the category; we can create nonce words or describe the category (we just did). However, the point is that the mere fact that something is run by electricity is just not very important to us. That is because it involves no social consequences. Electric stoves will be found next to gas stoves in an appliance store, electric staplers next to old-fashioned staplers in an office supply store, and battery-powered monkeys next to their wind-up cousins in a toy store. It is false to say that we actually have this category, but merely fail to have a word for it. Quite the opposite: we fail to have a word for it because we don't use it. By way of demonstration, it is extremely unlikely that among the objects that floated through your mind when you read the phrase "device run by electricity" was your telephone, yet it obviously counts. So does your car, now that you think about it, but you didn't.

There are two other major clues that can help determine if a particular notion is a primary category. One, an emic category is defined by its opposite. Two, an emic category implies ontology, that is, it "exists" at some level that a merely etic notion does not. I can make this clearer again using our own sexual categories. For our culture, hetero is the *opposite* of homo. My hometown has made it legal for heteros to discriminate against homos. This minimal pair may literally make the difference between life and death. Homo and hetero denote real categories, real people. Thus if a friend tells me he is gay, and I later find out he has been sleeping with a woman, I would be at the least surprised. I would wonder what happened to *change* him. If a friend tells me he is straight, and I later find out he has been sleeping with a man, I may even feel betrayed. How could he have lied to me about what he *really* was?

But for etic categories, take the example of someone calling himself a "leg-man" or a "breast-man." These are concepts within our culture—there are magazines and web sites devoted to these tastes—but they do not exist at the same ontological level as homo and hetero. "Leg-man" is not the opposite of "breast-man." If a friend tells me that he is a "leg-man," and I later find out he has been admiring a woman's breasts, I would not wonder why he had changed, how he had hidden what he *really* was. I probably would not even notice.³⁰ Similarly for the ancient world: when Callignotos

30 Specifically, these sub-emic classifications are "covert categories." See Berlin et al. 1968, Burling 1970.84, Kay and Kempton 1984, Eastman 1990.108–12.

switches from a girl to a boy, no one, except poor Ionis herself, cares (Callimachus *AP* 5.6). When Horace switches from a girl to a boy and then to either a girl or boy, no one cares (*Epod.* 11). Callignotos has not changed his sexual category; Horace has not changed what he really was.³¹

ESSENTIALIST VERSUS CONSTRUCTIONIST OR THE MYTH OF THE HETEROSEXUAL

Stein briefly states his position (1990.325): “Essentialists hold that a person’s sexual orientation is a culture-independent, objective and intrinsic property.” The problem here is the very words “sexual orientation.” That the only orientation that can exist is either towards people of the same sex or of a different sex, in other words our binary opposition, has already been assumed. Essentialists do not consider the possibility that a “sexual orientation” might in fact be oriented on a totally different axis than ours. The question has been begged. Essentialists hold that “sexual orientation” simply exists somehow, out there, in Platonic isolation, apart from any culture. But emic categories such as heterosexual and homosexual cannot exist except as part of a system of differences.

Heterosexuality is the unmarked case in our society. Perhaps giving way to a natural desire to state their position as forcefully, memorably, and paradoxically as possible, many social constructionists, who should know better, sometimes overstate their case. Thus one runs into such statements as, “Homosexuals did not exist before such and such a date,” thus merely reproducing this assumption (see Halperin 1990.43 for a criticism).

31 For a change in sexual category, cf. Mart. 2.84: Venus, in revenge, changed Philoctetes into a passive with men (*mollis erat facilisque viris*) and Sertorius into a passive with women (*lingat cunnum*). Both are in the same category; the gender of their partners is irrelevant.

To illustrate this common mistake, if Pausanias (or any other committed παιδεραστής) had suddenly fallen in love with a woman, his fellow symposiasts might have been surprised but not appalled. Pausanias’s friends would have thought that he had changed tastes but *not* sexual categories. He would still be a normal manly man, even if he followed the Pandemic Aphrodite (Pl. *Symp.* 181b). They *would*, however, have been appalled had he suddenly announced that he now preferred Agathon to fuck him up the ass. His lover is still the same, he is still a “homosexual” (in our terms), but he would have become a κίναϊδος, a totally different sexual category. Preference for boys or girls (or, let us not forget, both) was *at most* a sub-emic matter. This is the common error of those who would force Aristophanes’ fable into being a proof-text that the Greeks operated with a system of homo versus hetero (e.g., Boswell 1980.94–101, 1990b.77, Cohen 1991.164, Thorp 1992). See the criticisms of Halperin 1990.18–21, Carnes 1997.

The result is that social constructionism is sometimes seen as an attack on the reality of the category “homosexual” and hence an attack on homosexuals (Vance 1989.16, 27, Stein 1990.340, S. Epstein 1990), i.e., once you dissolve the category “homosexual,” all that is left is “heterosexual.” To counter this, I wish in what follows to deconstruct the category “heterosexual” first. Constructionism does not, or at least should not, deny the “reality” of *individuals* whom *our* society would label “heterosexual” (Halperin 1990.34), i.e., at various places, at various times, there may have existed men who were exclusively (or primarily) attracted by women, or women who were exclusively (or primarily) attracted by men (though, in fact, when we come to look at the classical record, they are extraordinarily hard to find).³² What constructionism does deny is that our category “heterosexual” necessarily has any meaning as a category in other societies. That is, it insists that “heterosexual” is a *emic* category. In other cultures, it may not exist at all, or only exist at a sub-cultural (etic) level.

Thus the claim made by some that if we discovered a genetic basis for homosexuality, the claims of social constructionists would be disproved, is incorrect.³³ The fact that human sounds are based on biology is true but not relevant. The sounds /r/ and /l/ might be found in most languages. It might turn out that an inability to make the distinction in all environments is genetic (like being able to roll one’s tongue). None of this changes the fact that a person so born would be unnoticeable in Japanese and have a speech impediment in English. That is, even if there were a gene for homosexuality, even if a desire for one sex over the other were hard-wired into the brain, even if “homosexual” did describe some eternal category of human being, none of this would have made a scrap of difference to the way one was sexually categorized in Greece or Rome.

We all recognize that different societies have lines totally different from ours that divide the sacred from the secular, the edible from the inedible, kin from non-kin. We realize that to apply our labels of liberal versus conservative to Pericles’ politics is anachronistic. We warn our students that *pious* does not mean “pious,” that *familia* does not mean the same thing as “family.” We are willing to believe that the Greeks and Romans inhabited a different physical world, a different spiritual world, a

32 See Parker 1997.55, 56 for Roman examples.

33 Halperin 1990.49, Boswell 1990a.138, Stein 1990.330. See below on the hunt for the “gay gene.”

different psychological world. Yet many adamantly refuse to accept that they inhabited a different sexual world.³⁴

SEX SYSTEMS

The reasons are not hard to find. Since our own beliefs are so obviously true to us, I want to examine in some detail this powerful reluctance to let go. We all recognize, at least on reflection, that many of the large-scale classifications about human beings that we make—for example, race, hair color, eye color—are socially constructed.³⁵ Race is a touchy but particularly good example. Race is obviously biological,³⁶ and yet the current system of racial classification used by the United States census lumps together Basques, Arabs, Magyars, Lapps, and Berbers as “white.” The Pinhas, whose ancestors came from Portugal via Brazil, are “white”; the Piñas, whose ancestors came from Spain via Mexico, are not. The British classification of “Asian” means something quite different in America. If we look around, we realize that blond/brunette/redhead are arbitrary divisions and no more cover the observable universe than blue/brown/hazel.

However, these classifications are not binary and, at the back of our minds, there lurks the suspicion that hetero versus homo is in fact somehow more fundamental, more important, more commonsensical, in short, more *natural* than any other binary division.³⁷ There are two primary reasons for this. One is the obvious observation that there are only two sexes. Therefore the fundamental choice each individual makes *must* be which of the two sexes to have sex with. In the first place, however, the distinction between hetero and homo does not correspond to the division of the sexes. Indeed, our own system is one of the oddest in the world in that our classification cuts right across the actual lines of physical sex itself.

In the second place, our commonsensical notion is simply not true even on the most fundamental of levels. Biological sex is *not* in fact binary.

34 Several recent articles argue (or simply assume: see notes 4, 7) that the categories of hetero and homo are human universals or, at least, obviously true for the ancient world. Most of the discussion has focused on the Greeks. Recent examples of this presumptive essentialism include Cohen 1991, esp. 171–202, Thorp 1992, Davidson 1997, Hubbard 1998, and Sissa 1999. Davidson 1997, for example, assumes without argument that “sexuality” means our split between homo and hetero (e.g., 161, 166).

35 For “race” in antiquity, McCoskey 1999 is an excellent starting point.

36 Except that, of course, it isn’t. See Gould 1996 for a popular account.

37 See Geertz 1983.80–85 on this aspect of “common sense.”

Intersexed animals (freemartins in cattle, for example) are quite common and feature as an important part of many native classification systems.³⁸ Human genitals develop out of a single pattern, modified by hormones received while in the womb.³⁹ And though, of course, human genitalia tend to *cluster* into two common patterns, hermaphrodites, that is, persons born with external genitals not easily assignable to one of the two phenotypical patterns of male or female, account for somewhat less than one percent of births.⁴⁰

Before we begin, we need two working definitions, those of “sex” and “gender” (Jacobs and Roberts 1989.454, cf. 439–40):

sex—the observable biophysiological characteristics of females, males, and hermaphrodites, androgynes or intersexed persons; i.e., a person’s sex type; perceived biophysiological facts.

gender—the cultural construction of perceived biophysical facts; i.e., a sociocultural designation of the biobehavioral and psychosocial qualities of the sexes.

That is, sex is about penises and vulvas (or things in between), and gender is about what we do with them; sex is about biology, gender is about

38 Hill 1935.274 n. 2, Koch 1963, Edgerton 1964.1291, Martin and Voorhies 1975.32, Hunter 1995.139–74.

39 The basic biological fact is that the unmarked human embryo is “female,” that is, we all (irrespective of our chromosomes) wind up looking female (genitals, etc.) unless something *happens* to us (i.e., a dose of testosterone). Contrary to Aristotle’s doctrine, women are not maimed men, men (disconcertingly enough to some) are altered women. There is a convenient summary at Martin and Voorhies 1975.27–32, and a more detailed treatment for a medical audience at Josso 1981 and Edmonds 1995.

40 “Hermaphrodite” here refers only to external morphological (not genetic or histological) features, since these are the only ones visible to pre-scientific inspection (see Money and Ehrhardt 1972.5). Since medical discussions of intersexuality are usually organized by etiology, estimates of the incidence of all cases of morphological hermaphroditism vary. There will also be differences in various populations. Overzier 1963.531 gives an incidence of 0.2–0.3%; Herdt 1993c.437 identified 14 cases among the Sambia (for whom see below) over three generations with a historical population of 1700, approx. 0.8%; Imperato-McGlinley et al. 1974 gives a 1% incidence for 5-alpha reductase deficiency in her sample in the Dominican Republic (see also Saenger 1981.166); J. Epstein 1990.100 as high as 2–4%. For overviews, see Katchadourian 1989.100–02, Money and Ehrhardt 1972, J. Epstein 1990, Hunter 1995.204–38. For an article fascinating in its complete blindness to the effects of raising children as male or female, see Walsh 1994.

culture. But as Yanagisako and Collier (1987.15) have pointed out, even the most seemingly basic facts about biological “sex” depend on cultural “gender.”⁴¹ Notice how even in the careful definitions above, the meaning of “sex” is dependent on the pre-existing categories of “females, males, and hermaphrodites,” etc. In short, even what gets to count as a penis or a vulva is determined by culture.⁴² As Miller (1993.5) notes: “Among humans, a new-born baby is immediately defined in most (if not all) cultures as a boy or a girl on the basis of its genitals.” And with that word, “defined,” we are in the realm of culture, for, as Miller goes on to say, “We cannot surely predict, on the basis of either genitals, chromosomes, or hormones what an individual’s gender configurations will be in a particular group.”

“To reject ‘male’ and ‘female’ as natural categories . . . flies in the face of a common-sense belief that the species ‘naturally’ falls into male and female categories, necessary for reproduction, and it seems to deny the fact that human bodies’ genitals, everywhere and nearly always, conform to one of two major types in our species” (Atkinson 1990.10). However, the problem of hermaphrodites is one that the gender classification systems of many cultures handle in a number of different ways.⁴³ In one common pattern, hermaphrodites may be simply destroyed as a type of monster in an effort to preserve gender boundaries (see Douglas 1966 for the concept). This is what the Romans did.⁴⁴ Our own technological society employs the scalpel, and since penises are currently easier to cut off than to glue on, most hermaphrodites are recut as “female.”⁴⁵ But other cultures make other decisions. To take a number of much-studied examples, the Pokot of Kenya recognize three *sexes* (Edgerton 1964; see the chart below). Most infants are declared to be male or female, but those with genital malformations (both

41 Rubin, while first drawing the distinction, had already pointed out the interdependence of “sex/gender systems” (1975.159). See also the review by Moore 1994 (esp. 816–20).

42 “In all known societies sexual dimorphism is treated as a major differentiating factor of any human being, of the same order as difference in age, the other universal of the same kind” (Mead 1961.1451). The remark is revealing, since difference in age is marked on a wide variety of sliding scales.

43 See Dreger 1998 for nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe.

44 Obseq. 25, Livy 27.37.6; Cornell 1981.36, MacBain 1982.127–33.

45 Money and Ehrhardt 1972.48, Baker 1981.265, Garber 1989, Edmonds 1995. See Money and Ehrhardt 1972.118–23, Frayser 1985.83–85, and now Colapinto 2000, for the horrifying case of twin boys, one of whose penis was accidentally burnt off. He was surgically altered (at Money’s suggestion), raised as female, and treated with hormones. The cultural logic of female equals mutilated male is startlingly open; cf. a similar decision in a case of micropenis at Money and Ehrhardt 1972.123–25.

genetic males and females) are either killed (the Roman solution) or assigned to a third biological sex, labeled *sererr*; “neuter.” Some *sererr* take up male dress, some female, but since the *gender* roles of “male” and “female” depend heavily on the important circumcision rites for both these sexes and on the production of children, *sererr* have no gender role. As one Pokot said, “A *sererr* cannot be a real person” (Edgerton 1964.1295). The Pokot operate with three biological *sexes*, but only two cultural *genders*.⁴⁶

The Sambia of Papua New Guinea “recognize three sexes and at birth assign infants a sex” on the basis on genitals: namely female, male, and *kwolu-aatmwol*, which includes a specific type of hermaphrodite.⁴⁷ Herdt summarizes the category (1993b.68):

These traits include, for instance, anatomical ambiguity at birth; the assignment of the infant to neither the male nor female category but rather the *kwolu-aatmwol* category; the existence of a lexeme and noun of the same name; a cluster of social attitudes about personal development and change; the existence of moral and social practices that constitute a different means of handling social life after puberty.

The Bimin-Kuskusmin of New Guinea (Mountain-Ok language family) have a complicated procedure. Monorchids are destroyed, but the same type of hermaphrodites as found among the Sambia (Herdt 1993c.431, Poole 1985.229 n. 16) are assigned a separate sex, called *yomnok-min* and said to possess a *maiyoob-mem.fuun*, “penis-clitoris.” The child is “considered

46 The summary at Martin and Voorheis 1975.89 should be corrected accordingly.

47 Genetic males (XY) suffering from 5-alpha reductase deficiency disorder, characterized by little development of the genital tubercle, varying degrees of hypospadias (female placement of the urethra), bi-fid scrotum (better described as unfused labia), and undescended testes; there are varying degrees of masculinization at puberty. Herdt 1993b.16, 68; 1993c; and earlier treatments at Herdt 1981.197–98, 207–08, 291–92; Herdt and Davidson 1985; see Herdt and Stoller 1990.202–45 for a detailed overview.

The original medical description of the condition by Imperato-McGinley et al. 1974 and 1979 covered cases of *guevedoche* (which they gloss as “penis-at-twelve”; *gueve* is rather rude slang) in the Dominican Republic. The biological reductionist framework for gathering and presenting the data prevents a clear analysis, though Herdt favors seeing a local classification as a third sex as well as a third gender category. See Herdt 1993c for a review and bibliography.

at first to be a more or less normal girl,” but has special roles in male rituals. Later when the testicles have descended, the child is reclassified as “the androgynous counterpart of the ‘paramount female ritual elder’ *waeng aiyem ser*” (Poole 1981.158 n. 2 and 16, 1985.191 and 229 n. 16). The Bimin-Kuskusmin thus appear to operate with three biological sexes⁴⁸ and three gender roles, one of which is temporally bound. Other cases will be considered below. In short, our assumption that everyone must be either a heterosexual or homosexual makes no sense when many cultures count more than two *sexes*.

BIOLOGICAL REDUCTIONISM

For use almost can change the stamp of nature,
And either curb the devil, or throw him out
With wondrous potency.

Hamlet III.iv

Or rather, use *always* can change the stamp of nature.

The second reason for the powerful resistance to the idea that there could be ways of organizing the sexual world other than our own split of hetero versus homo is a residual, often unconscious, and usually unacknowledged, folk Darwinism.⁴⁹ The reasoning runs: since reproduction is necessary to the survival of the species, and since homosexuals do not reproduce, heterosexual must be the natural, built in, or—in the current form of mystification—genetic, norm. Let us take each of these points in turn.

1) Reproduction is necessary to the survival of the species. Indeed, but this has nothing to do with individuals. Many people in many societies remain celibate for short periods or for lifetimes.⁵⁰ Many will never reproduce. We are dealing with what has been characterized as the “Let’s begin with the fact that man must eat” school of anthropology.⁵¹ But of course, he needn’t. Many people in many societies remain foodless for short periods or

48 Possibly four, one of which is destroyed at birth.

49 Herdt 1993b.15, 25–32. Cf. Atkinson’s remarks cited above (1990.10).

50 For a case of institutionalized “low sex drive,” see Heider 1976.

51 The whole idea of a “sex drive” stems from an assimilation of food (nutrition, necessary to individual survival) to sex (reproduction, necessary for species survival). For a critique in psychoanalysis and biology, see Nierenberg 1998, succinctly in Katchedourian 1989.239–41, 1990.2–3.

starve themselves to death in various culturally sanctioned ways.⁵² That what counts as sex (erotic activity) is as culturally determined as what counts as sex (biological assignment) is obvious to anthropologists. That what counts as sex may depend on what your definition of what “is” is has recently been demonstrated nationally in the United States.

2) Homosexuals do not reproduce.⁵³ But, of course, they do. Here we are not just talking about lesbian moms and gay dads in our own culture but the obvious fact that no “sexual orientation”—provided that it stops short of nausea, impotence, and vaginismus—precludes having a child or two. Let us add to this the fact that what counts as reproduction and parenthood are equally culturally determined.⁵⁴ If there is a hard-wired biological drive to reproduce, many people in many cultures still somehow manage to ignore it or to satisfy it in a variety of ways.

The real point is that Dame Nature is indifferent to 99.9% of our orgasms. It is obvious that the folk models of Darwinism do not work. Only a small percentage of our acts even of male-female-vaginal-intercourse-with-ejaculation result in pregnancy. As long as we have enough hits to reproduce ourselves, with a couple to spare to give our selfish genes an advantage, Nature does not care how we get off: heterosexual, homosexual, oral, anal, intercrural, masturbatory are all a matter of supreme indifference. Nature is interested in babies not orgasms. Human beings are unique in not having estrus. We have sex for fun (Martin and Voorheis 1975.117–19).

At the back of all this is an only occasionally explicit teleology. We ask, “What is sex *for*?” And since the usual answer is, in the words of the

52 For a few Roman examples, App. *BC* 4.15, 21, 23, Pliny *Ep.* 1.12, Suet. *Aug.* 53; see Parker 1998.166–67.

53 This is the unstated premise behind E. O. Wilson’s formulation of one of the earlier and most influential sociobiological “explanations” of homosexuality: Wilson 1975.555. See Dickermann 1995, Tang-Martinez 1997.136–38 for criticism.

54 A review at Yaganisako and Collier 1987.32–34. See below for an example from the Mohave.

This is the not-uncommon error made by Zeitlin 1999.54: “For example, a certain ‘orthodox’ line that stresses the categories of ‘active’ and ‘passive’ as central to ancient ideas about sexuality, regardless of gender . . . inspires gay theorists to underplay differences between the sexes in order to promote a parity between heterosexual and same-sex relations at the cost of undervaluing the role and importance of the family [and] procreation.” Much might be said about this, but here note merely the obvious fact that “sex” is not the same as “family,” or “procreation.” We need only look at adoption as a reproductive strategy among the Romans: Corbier 1991.63–78. Further, theorists (gay or otherwise) are not arguing “parity” but the *irrelevance* of the labels “heterosexual” and “same-sex” to the classification of sexual persons and acts.

Book of Common Prayer, “First, it was ordained for the procreation of children,” sex is assumed to be heterosexual by default.⁵⁵ This mode of thinking is not confined to Judeo-Christianity, though it is the origin of most of the resulting discourse about what is “natural” and what counts as “sodomy.” The same teleology is present in parts of later Plato.⁵⁶

3) This is not the place to enter the huge debate over the resurgence of genetics, sociobiology, and evolutionary psychology, which attempt to anchor current gender stereotypes in “nature.” Sahlins 1976, Hubbard et al. 1982, Lewontin et al. 1984, Fausto-Sterling 1992, 2000, and Gowaty 1997 provide detailed criticisms.⁵⁷ Two recent attempts to find biological bases for “homosexuality” have made a considerable splash in the headlines. In 1991, Simon LeVay claimed to have discovered the “gay brain,”⁵⁸ and, in 1994, Dean Hamer claimed to have discovered the “gay gene.”⁵⁹ The experimental and methodological errors of both these studies have been exposed by many.⁶⁰ The hunt for differences between the brains of “gay” men and “straight” men (who, after all, share the same chromosomes) pales into insignificance beside the hunt for differences between the brains of men and women. However, the authors of the most recent and most complete survey of such attempts are forced to conclude that there is not a single neuroanatomical difference that can be reliably associated with any supposed cogni-

55 For an excellent critique of the folk-Darwinian notion that sexual pleasure is *for* reproduction and various attempts to explain what the clitoris is *for*, since it is not *for* reproduction, see Gould 1991. See also the brief statement by Katchedourian 1990.3, Gooren 1990.71, and the articles by Haumann, Herrn, and Gooren in De Cecco and Parker 1995.

56 Hence the misinterpretation that Plato condemns “homosexuality” as “unnatural” at *Laws* 636a–c, 835b–42a. See Dover 1978.165–67, Winkler 1990.18, 21.

57 Lewontin et al. 1984 (esp. 152–53, 260–61 on “homosexuality”) and Tang-Martinez 1997 are especially approachable. See also Worthman 1995 for a literature review. I note recent books entitled *A Natural History of . . . Love, Sex, Homosexuality, Parenting, and Rape*. For a critique of the entire notion of “infant determinism,” including pre-infant (i.e., genetic and hormonal) determinism, see Kagan 1998.83–150 (chap. 2).

58 LeVay 1991. Popular accounts at LeVay 1993, 1996. An uncritical popular account is found in Mondimore 1996.

59 Hamer published a single paper and then a popular book (Hamer and Copeland 1994). See the devastating review by Gonsiorek (1995), who is friendly to biological determinism and markedly not friendly to the “radical feminist / French theory / postmodern / queer studies / MLA / academic chic crowd.” After a brief flurry of publicity, no more was heard. Hamer’s study has been thoroughly discredited. For critiques of this and other attempts, see Hubbard and Wald 1993, McGuire 1995, Rice et al. 1999; also the brief accounts at Horgan 1995 and Marshall 1995.

60 De Cecco and Parker 1995 provides a convenient review.

tive or behavioral difference. The variation in cognition or hemispheric asymmetry within each sex is greater than the variation between each sex.⁶¹

On the “gay gene,” I wish merely to point out two facts. First, it is obvious that even the most basic genetic facts are socially realized. Blond hair, almond eyes, or black skin may be vitally important in, say, New York, but they will be matters of relative indifference in Stockholm, Tokyo, and Nairobi, respectively. A Thai or Ibo born with the gene that fails to control lactase production (nearly 100% of the population) will simply never know it, since milk is not a part of the Thai or Ibo diet.⁶² In exactly the same way, to restate, a Greek or Roman man born with the putative “gay gene” would simply never know it.⁶³ His supposed biologically predetermined desire to have sex with other males would in itself be completely unremarkable. He would be considered a normal manly man or a disgusting pervert entirely on the basis of *how* he enjoyed that sex with other males.

Second, a gene encodes the amino acid sequence for a single protein.⁶⁴ That is it. A “gene for homosexuality” sounds plausible to some, a “protein for homosexuality,” less so. Committing ourselves to a gene/protein

61 Levy and Heller 1992.268. See also Hubbard and Wald 1993.94–98, Byne and Parsons 1993, Kaplan and Rodgers 1994.76–88, Byne 1995 for surveys and criticisms. The assumption (often unstated) is that gay men must have more “feminine” brains; this was the basis of LeVay’s study that compared the brains of supposed gay men and supposed straight women to those of supposed heterosexual men (see also Doell 1995 and a critique of the same assumption in Gooren 1990, 1995). It should also be pointed out that, in attempts to find differences between the brains of straight men and gay men, the battleground keeps shifting. Dörner claims that gay men have a “feminine” hypothalamus in general; Swaab and Hofman look only to the suprachiasmatic nucleus (to which more traditional researchers assign circadian rhythms; see Ibata et al. 1999); Allan and Gorski see it in the anterior commissure; and LeVay claims the difference lies in the third interstitial nucleus of the anterior hypothalamus (INAH-3), an area whose very existence is doubtful. For summaries of this research, see Byne 1995, Haumann 1995.

62 Harrison et al. 1988.502–03. Far from genes controlling social customs, social customs can have a profound effect on genes. A standard example: the Nama of Namibia (and other groups in the Khoisan linguistic group) have acquired a gene, lacking in the closely related San, that produces lactase and allows them to digest milk, entirely because of their pastoralist way of life. See Cavalli-Sforza, Menozzi, and Piazza 1994.176, Relethford 1997.402–04. Another well-studied example of the effects of cultural practice on human genetics is the frequency of sickle cell anemia (caused by a single base substitution). See Cavalli-Sforza, Menozzi, and Piazza 1994.224–25, 231–32, Relethford 1997.387–94.

63 See above, on the example of the genetic ability to roll one’s tongue.

64 Which may in turn control other genes that make proteins (the so-called regulatory genes). A clear non-technical statement is found at Hubbard and Wald 1993.52–53; see also Cavalli-Sforza, Menozzi, and Piazza 1994.5–7.

for homosexuality or heterosexuality entails a belief in the existence of a chemical or chemicals that could alter “sexual orientation” in the fetus or the adult. Some groups may be looking for a “cure” for homosexuality, but it is unlikely that the same groups are prepared to admit that their own heterosexuality might be “cured” by something slipped into their own or their mothers’ IV. It is absurd to claim a gene for “homosexuality” or any other complex social construction, when the genetic basis of even such obvious folk examples of genetics as hair or eye color is uncertain and manifestly realized only in cultural practice: what counts as “red” hair? What exactly are “hazel” eyes?⁶⁵ There can no more be a “gene” for homosexuality than there can be a gene for Republicanism.

This is an example not idly chosen. Hamer has, after a long silence, moved from the “gay gene” to claiming to have discovered *the* gene for “novelty seeking” (Hamer and Copeland 1998), a complex cultural notion if there ever was one.⁶⁶ There are “mood genes” (19–20), genes for “aggression” (107–08), as well as “homosexuality” (182–99). What one wishes to find, of course, in many cases determines what one will discover. Hamer and his like go looking for a gene for “homosexuality” and, not too surprisingly, they discover it. But they didn’t go looking for the gene for ἀρετή, a central Greek concept, because it wasn’t a central concept for them. “Parental affection” is just as likely (indeed, far more likely) to have a genetic basis than “homosexuality” or “thrill seeking.” But the biological reductionists don’t go looking for the gene for “parental affection.” Earlier pseudoscientists, however, did, and the phrenologists discovered it (located at the occipital bone, by the by).

The biological reductionism and political motivation of these accounts are obvious when they turn from explaining homosexuality to presenting “Just-so Stories” to justify current gender roles.⁶⁷ Thus Potts can write with a straight face (1988.7):

Ecologically, men and women are more like two different, partly noncompetitive species, than like two sexes of the same species eating the same type of food. . . . In biologi-

65 Harrison et al. 1988.312–14, Cavalli-Sforza, Menozzi, and Piazza 1994.266–67.

66 Cf. S. Hill 1998 on the difficulties created by varying cultural definitions in the search for a genetic basis of so seemingly straightforward a concept as “alcoholism.”

67 The phrase is Lock’s (1993.148). Tang-Martinez 1997.136 draws the comparison and speaks of “adaptive story-telling.”

cal terms, marriage is a compromise between the conflicting reproductive agendas of the two sexes united by their complementarity in exploiting food supplies. A woman gives sex for love and a man gives love in order to obtain sex, and both give one another food. . . . What we see with homosexuality is each sex implementing its own biological drives without the need for compromise with the opposite sex. The "cruising" homosexual chooses his partners purely on physical grounds, often not knowing their names, seeking a high degree of eroticism, and often having many sexual outlets in a single evening and persisting in this way of life for many years. Lesbian lovers tend to be consistently faithful over many years, to place companionship and human relations above erotic experience, and to seek relatively infrequent sexual outlets.

What is surprising in such accounts is that mechanisms evolved by a wise Nature for reproductive success are claimed to be revealed in their purest form in homosexuals. For Hamer, too, heterosexual gender roles (in all cultures at all times) are no less hard-wired than being homosexual, and, unsurprisingly, what Nature wants us to do turns out to have a remarkable resemblance to life in the American suburbs of the 1950s, at least as depicted on TV. Hamer conveniently summarizes his findings (Hamer and Copeland 1998:171–72): "What women really want is money. . . . What men really want is sex." Women are apparently genetically preprogrammed to be whores, men to be johns. These banalities are all presented as disinterested science.⁶⁸

First, note that the search always turns out to be for *male* homosexuality, never for "lesbianism," which seems alternately harder to explain or else somehow more natural. Second, note that the search is always for a cause for "homosexuality," never for the cause for heterosexuality. The "normal" is left unmarked. Nature apparently need not concern herself with genes for the vital business of reproduction. But as soon as we say "the gene for heterosexuality," we realize that the notion is as ridiculous as the idea of a gene for "novelty seeking." If anything ought to be, on a folk-Darwinian

68 On the fetishizing of "the gene" in popular science, see Lewontin et al. 1984, Hubbard and Wald 1993, Nelkin and Lindee 1995.

basis, encoded in the genes and hard-wired in the brain it's reproduction: no babies, no more genes. Yet sex is not the same as reproduction. To take an obvious example, many heterosexuals manage not to reproduce at all or to postpone reproduction for a variety of cultural reasons. Desire for tenure (not a human universal) can easily top a supposed genetic mandate.

The basic fact is that, in every situation, Culture can always change the stamp of Nature. The silliness of biological reductionism can be seen by turning to the other fundamental Darwinian imperatives: self-preservation and nutrition. There is manifestly no "gene for self-preservation." "Fight or flight" is indeed a decision, involving everything from a biological adrenaline rush (which may itself be conditioned by learned experience and societal expectations) to culturally determined notions of honor. There is obviously no "gene for eating." Even on the purely biological level, "eating" is a complex process involving all sorts of mechanisms. Rubin draws the comparison (1975.165):

The needs of sexuality and reproduction must be satisfied as much as the need to eat, and one of the most obvious deductions which can be made from the data of anthropology is that these needs are hardly ever satisfied in any "natural" form, any more than are the needs for food. Hunger is hunger, but what counts as food is culturally determined and obtained. Every society has some form of organized economic activity. Sex is sex, but what counts as sex is equally culturally determined and obtained. Every society also has a sex/gender system—a set of arrangements by which the biological raw product of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention and satisfied in a conventional manner, no matter how bizarre some of the conventions might be.

Yet somehow the immensely complicated social notion of "choice of object for sexual affection" turns out to be controlled by a gene, or rather an aberration turns out to be controlled by a gene, while the unmarked case is left to be "natural."

The difficulties in attempting to reduce a complex social phenomenon such as "heterosexuality" or "homosexuality" to a deterministic genetic basis can be easily seen by comparison with incest taboos. An incest taboo (in some form) is manifestly adaptionist: inbreeding increases the

chances for harmful mutations and recessive traits to emerge. Yet a claim that there is a “gene for incest avoidance” is absurd.⁶⁹ What counts as incest varies greatly from culture to culture: some incest taboos avoid close kin, others demand close kin, still others have no biological basis at all.⁷⁰

In short, there is no more a gene for heterosexuality than there is a gene for liking liver. There may indeed be a biological basis to one person’s love for chopped liver and another’s intense dislike of it—something to do with the way receptor neurons are activated by complex esters, perhaps, or the way the brain processes those nerve impulses. An evolutionary explanation can be easily created: someone with a gene that makes him hate liver will leave more for the normal members of his family.⁷¹ But cultural and idiopathic factors equally play a role. One person may associate liver with a nasty incident in the woodshed, another with precious childhood memories. The important difference is that liking or not liking liver does not make one into a different type of person. Hepatophilia has few important social consequences.

It is almost impossible in our society to escape the assumption that humans’ only choice when it comes to sex is whether we will have it with men or with women. But this is demonstrably false in everyone’s experience. First, all of us do not, in fact, want to have sex with *only* men or *only* women. There are many of us who are interested in having sex with all sorts and conditions of men and women. Second, all of us do not, in fact, want to have sex with *all* men or *all* women. The statement, “I wouldn’t sleep with you if you were the last man on earth,” ought to be sociobiologically impossible. To confine ourselves to our own society, a “gene for homosexuality” might seem reasonable, but a “gene for being the bottom with large

69 Yet Wilson 1998.173–80 makes just such a claim. Lewontin et al. 1984.137 points out the obvious flaws. To get around the problem of universals that are not, Wilson invokes the notion of the “epigenetic,” i.e., a genetic basis but elaborated by culture; incest avoidance is thus “epigenetic,” so too, it appears, is a fear of snakes (71–71, 78–81, 127–28). Similarly Shepherd 1983.9: incest avoidance, territoriality, hierarchy, family formation, and “a sense of justice” are all in our genes. Also Brown 1991 for highly adaptable definitions of what constitutes a “universal”: see the criticisms of Tang-Martinez 1997.135.

70 General overviews by Peoples and Bailey 1997.171–81, Barnouw 1987.139–43. An obvious example of an incest taboo with no real biological basis is the Korean prohibition on marriage between people with the same last name.

71 This is essentially how Wilson’s explanation for a gene for homosexuality works (1975.555).

hairy men” is a bit more difficult to imagine. A “gene for heterosexual behavior both active and passive with blondes with small breasts” is equally hard to credit. Historically, where is the gene for sodomy? Cross-culturally, where is the gene for “the only proper sexual object . . . a cross-cousin of the opposite sex”?⁷² The Kinsey Scale, which rates people on a scale of zero to six for “homosexuality,” presupposes that male/female is the only axis of orientation there can be.⁷³ The Kinsey Scale is totally irrelevant in most cultures and to many individuals in our own culture. The statement that, despite native categories, everyone is *really* a homosexual or a heterosexual—or at least more a homosexual than a heterosexual—is manifestly false.⁷⁴ By way of demonstration, if a foreign anthropologist were to ask a man on the street if he preferred blondes or brunettes, the native might respond in all honesty that it made no difference. A good sense of humor or a large trust fund were more important. If hard pressed, the native might confess that, other things being equal, he was slightly more moved by blondes. But the visiting scholar would be wrong to cry “Aha!” and label him a latent xanthophile in denial. If the native informant further confessed that, actually, he was a tad partial to redheads, the scholar would be wrong to claim him as a case of bi-trich-ality. The point is that men (and women) may well be more partial to one hair color than another, and there are books, magazines, and web sites catering to their tastes, but xanthophilia is not an emic concept in our culture. Hair color does not make a difference to the type of sexual preference we use to categorize persons.

72 Among the Mehinaku of Brazil: Gregor 1985.8; cf. 52: “‘Humans,’ say the villagers, ‘have sex with other humans who are their cross-cousins. Animals don’t care who they have sex with.’”

73 Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin 1948.638–41, Stein 1990.334–36; see the critique by Gagnon 1990.

74 Boswell 1990a.162–73 for such an attempt. Cf. Cohen 1991.171: “It does not follow that the normative categories of sexual roles associated with the dichotomy of homosexual/heterosexual were entirely absent.”

GENDER SYSTEMS

Gender in human beings is not a purely dichotomous variable. It is not an evenly continuous one either, of course, or our love life would be even more complicated than it already is.

Clifford M. Geertz (Euro-American) 1983.81

You anthropologists make sure you get your words right.

Clyde M. Hall (Lemhi Shoshoni) 1997.272

I'm the only gay Eskimo in my tribe.

Corky and the Juice Pigs (Canadian Musicians)

We base our division of sexual categories on the axis of *same* versus *different*. Our primary division rests on the genders of the people involved.⁷⁵ Now it is clear from the anthropological record that this feature is simply not used in numerous other cultures. Instead, sexual categories are based primarily on divisions of age, social status, ritual category, or power relations.⁷⁶ Further, not only are the lines drawn in different places, more than two *genders* are recognized by various cultures. You cannot ethnocentrically assume the universality of hetero versus homo when you may have more than two choices. Because resistance to the idea that our homo/hetero divide may not be a human universal is so strong, and because this material may be unfamiliar to some readers, I want to offer brief overviews

75 Nicely outlined using the same sorts of markers that have been applied to other cultures by Kochems and Jacobs 1997.258–59, with tables 16-1 and 16-2.

76 See Davis and Whitten 1987, Jacobs and Roberts 1989, Herdt 1993a for overviews; Nanda 2000 is a useful introduction, but relies occasionally on secondary sources.

Herdt's studies of the Sambia of the Eastern Highlands of New Guinea (1981, 1982, 1984, 1999; Herdt and Stoller 1990.53–100) are perhaps the "thickest" descriptions of a single culture. "Sambia" is a geographical name applied to the people by Herdt; their language is closely related to Anga. See also Gilmore 1990, esp. 146–68 (on the Sambia), 201–19 (on the Tahitian *mahu*). See Whitehead's review (1985) of Herdt 1984 for how "the anxious over-centering of our theorists on homosexuality" may blind even the most astute observers to some types of data; also Whitehead 1986 and Knauff 1993.45–49, with extensive bibliography and a refreshing look at "ritualized heterosexuality." Herdt has responded to these concerns in the introduction to the new ed. of *Ritualized Homosexuality* (Herdt 1984/1993) and in Herdt 1999.

of three cultures whose gender classifications differ markedly from ours. (See the accompanying chart.)⁷⁷

One of the more thoroughly studied third genders is the *hijra*, found throughout India.⁷⁸ The term is a masculine substantivized adjective meaning “defective,” “lacking.”⁷⁹ *Hijra* frequently dress in feminine clothes (though their costume is not identical to that of women). They act as entertainers, especially at weddings and births, and as prostitutes. The classification includes hermaphrodites, impotent males (with normal genitals), as well as some women suffering from amenorrhea, a different type of failure (Nanda 1993.381, 383). *Hijra* are quite distinct from boys used as sexual objects, from passive males, and from other types of transvestites.⁸⁰ The men usually undergo castration to remove the “useless” testicles and penis. The class is defined on the axis of penetrator/penetrated, active/passive, fertile/sterile. Nanda summarizes (1993.380–81):

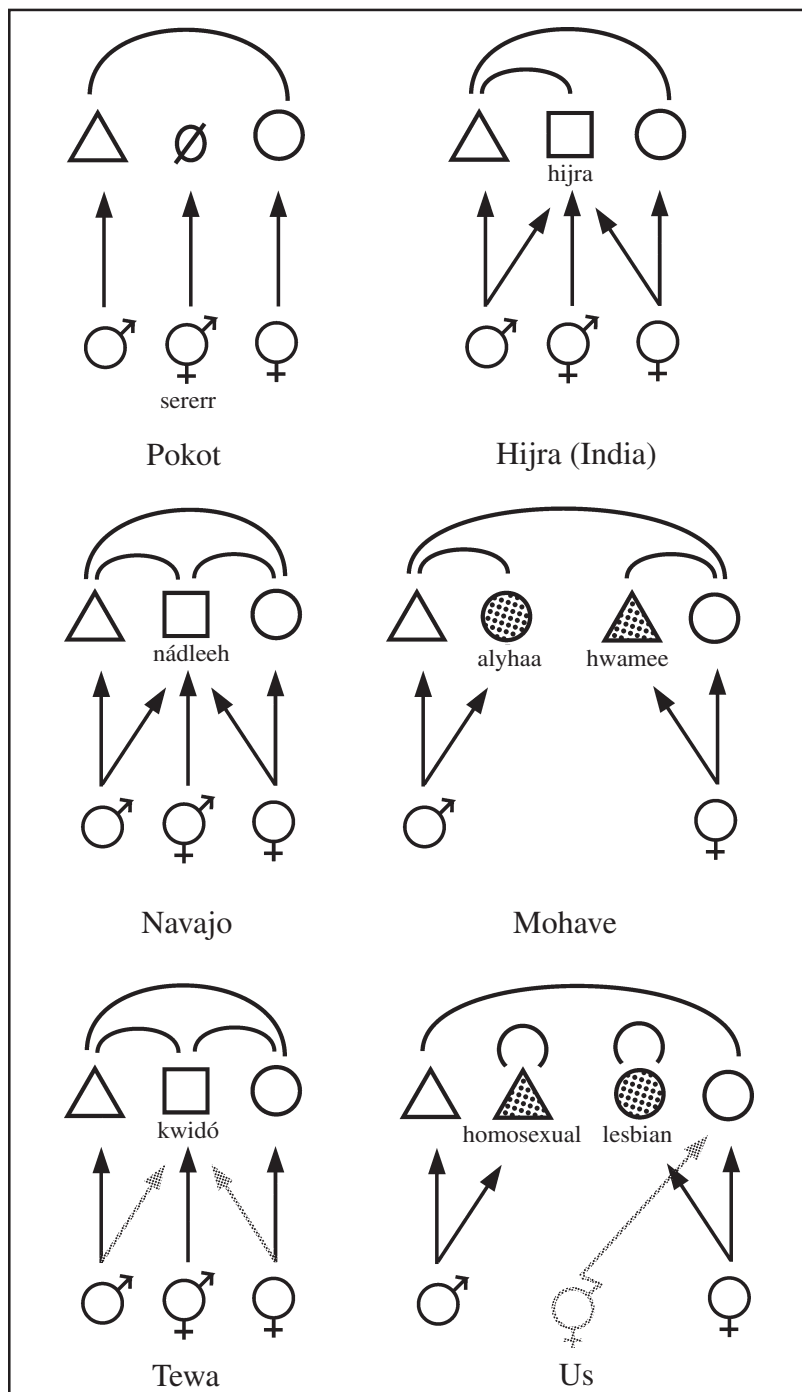
CHART LEGEND			
Sex/Body Type/Biology		Gender/Social	
♂	male	△	man
♀	female	○	woman
♂♀	hermaphrodite	□	other
		△	alternative male
		⊙	alternative female
		—	has sex with
		▮	not fully recognized by the culture

77 Adapted from diagrams in Martin and Voorhies 1975.89. I have obviously not attempted to encode every possible variety of sex and gender relation in each diagram. In particular, however, note the reflexive circles in the diagram for “Us”: “homosexuals” only have sex with other “homosexuals”: that is the definition of “homosexual.”

78 Nanda 1984, 1985, 1990 (the fullest data), 1993 (the most detailed analysis), and earlier work cited there.

79 In standard transcription (retroflex *r* in all forms): Hindi and Panjabi *hijar* (also *hijarā*) < Plnd **hijja-* (Turner 1969.814, no. 14084), cf. Sindī *hijro*, etc. Cf. Early Hind. *hij*, Urdu *hijr*, “weak, cowardly.” See Platts 1884.1221, 1245. For this and the other foreign terms that follow, I will use the singular or dictionary form throughout for convenience.

80 Though it is believed that a passive man will eventually become impotent and so a potential *hijra* (Nanda 1993.380, 403).



It is sexual impotence (with women), then, and not sexual relations with men that defines the potential *hijra*. . . . Thus, Indian emic sex and gender categories of *hijra* collapse the etic categories of (born) hermaphrodite and (made) eunuch. While ambiguous male genitalia serve as the most important culturally defined sign of the *hijra*, in practical terms any indication of a loss of masculinity, whether impotence, effeminate behavior or a desire for sexual relations with men in the receptor role, may be taken as a sign that one should join the *hijas*.

The *hijra* thus represent a third *gender* that incorporates a third *sex*. *Hijra* do not have sex with women or, more significantly, with other *hijra*. It is meaningless to label *hijra* “homosexuals”; some have no sexual relations with men, some are in fact women. Nor are the men who have sex with them “homosexuals,” since they are not in fact having sex with members of the same gender. They are perfectly normal, active, manly men, some of whom prefer someone other than a male or a female.⁸¹

A wide variety of different gender systems among Native Americans are referred to collectively as *berdache*.⁸² The Navajo had a system of three genders, but one which differed in important respects from the Indian system of *hijra*.⁸³ Traditional Navajo society recognized three gender classes: male, female, and *nádlee*.⁸⁴ *Nádlee* encompassed those born with mal-

81 Nanda 1993.397, 399, 402 on the “husbands” of *hijra*.

82 Jacobs 1968 (for the pioneering survey of earlier accounts), Whitehead 1981, Callender and Kochems 1983 (although every aspect of their definition can and has been challenged), Blackwood 1984, Williams 1987, Greenberg 1988.48–56, Herdt 1991, Jacobs and Cromwell 1992 (perhaps the best starting point), Williams 1992, Jacobs et al. 1997 (for the most recent work). Roscoe 1993 is an excellent survey; see also his invaluable critical review of the difficulties of sources and analysis: Roscoe 1987, esp. 154–71.

83 The traditional role was dying out by the time Hill made his report in 1935, when there were six *nádlee* still living, including the famous singer and weaver Hosteen Klah (for whom see Newcomb 1964 and Roscoe 1998.39–65; *Hosteen/hastiin* is an honorific). Newcomb 1964 is a loving biography, but misses Hosteen Klah’s status in Navajo society. It’s rather as if a Navajo had written an appreciative biography of Jean Genet and missed the fact that he was gay. The term *nádlee* is now being revived and applied to Euro-American “gay/homosexual” classifications; see Thomas 1997.161–62, 171 n. 6.

84 *nádlee*, a nominalized verb *ná-d-leeh*, “repeatedly becomes, changes” < root *líí*’ (Young and Morgan 1980.525, 1992.379, 384, 964); also with the addition of a subject pronoun *nádlee*-i, “one who changes,” as in the mythological figure ‘Asdzáá Nádleehe’, “Changing Woman” (Young and Morgan 1980.4, 1992.383, 964–65; where *é* = *í* by optional vowel

formed genitals as well as phenotypical males and females.⁸⁵ Thus traditional Navajo society operated with three recognized (biological) sexes and three recognized (cultural) genders.⁸⁶ *Nádlee*h did both men's and women's work (a source of considerable economic power) and were considered good luck and essential to the prosperity of the tribe. The clothing of *nádlee*h was not fixed in any pattern: sometimes male, sometimes female, sometimes a combination of elements—both among individuals and at different times. Most importantly for our discussion, *nádlee*h had sexual relations with, and married, both men and women, but did not have sex with other *nádlee*h.⁸⁷ Again, it makes no sense to label *nádlee*h “homosexuals,” since, from the Navajo (emic) perspective, they are not having sex with persons of their own

harmony; Thomas 1997.158. Correct Thomas 1997.171 n. 8 and Jacobs et al. 1997.15 n. 2).

Thomas 1997 makes an important contribution, but subdivides *nádlee*h for his own analysis of modern sex roles into “masculine female,” “feminine male,” and “*nádlee*h/hermaphrodites” (see his proper caution at 160, 164, and the criticisms of Kochems and Jacobs 1997.256). He applies these distinctions to traditional society (160–61), but later makes it clear that they were not part of native (emic) classifications (164–65, with Table 7-5 and 169, with Table 7-7). Nanda 2000.17 follows Thomas; Lang 1999 unfortunately misreads Thomas and misunderstands the evidence.

- 85 Thomas 1997.159, 171 n. 3. Hill 1935.273 said that male and female *nádlee*h were about equal in number, although of Hill's six living *nádlee*h, only one, the potter Kinaipai, said she was a “hermaphrodite” (Hill relied on translators); Hosteen Klah was known to be anatomically male; two others were said to be “transvestites,” but no sex is specified (273).
- 86 Thomas incorrectly reports: “Moreover, *nádlee*h is the gender marker for male-bodied individuals, although it has been misapplied to those who are female-bodied. *Nádlee*h — *baa'* is the proper term for them; a given family name is inserted between the words.” Rather, as Thomas's own evidence (see 171 n. 5) and the necessary family name make clear, *Nádlee*h *X baa'* is a *title* in which *nádlee*h is indeed the gender maker, while *baa'* (perfective stem “raids, makes war”) is used to form female war names (Kluckhohn and Leighton 1962.114–15, Young and Morgan 1980.149, 811, 1992.44–46). Also correct Thomas 1997.160: not *dilbaa'* but *dlǫbaa'* (Young and Morgan 1980.811, Young and Morgan 1992.156, 976 (no. 577) < stem noun *dlǫ*).
- 87 Hill 1935.276 reports one known case of divorce between a female *nádlee*h and “a normal person” (gender unspecified, but Hill seems to be assuming male) and two cases where a *nádlee*h had a child: both a female *nádlee*h married to a man (276) and a male *nádlee*h married to a woman, in the case of the grandfather of Hosteen Klah (273). Thomas 1997 confusingly uses the terms “heterosexual” and “homosexual” when he means same or different *gender*; he also incorrectly refers to “incest” (for the meaning of incest among the Navajo, see Kluckhohn and Leighton 1962.201). Correct Nanda 2000.15, 17 accordingly. His schema does, however, serve to point out that *nádlee*h is a distinct *gender*: that is, male-male, female-female, and *nádlee*h-*nádlee*h relations were unknown or strongly disapproved of (same *gender*), while male-female, male-*nádlee*h, and female-*nádlee*h (different *gender*) were known and accepted.

gender, and, from our perspective, they may well be having sex with persons of different (biological) sex. Equally, it makes no sense to refer to the wife or husband of a *nádlee* as a “homosexual”; she or he may be living with a *nádlee* who has a vagina or a *nádlee* who has a penis or a *nádlee* with malformed genitals.

One of the most detailed pictures of a culture operating with *four* distinct gender categories comes from George Devereux’s work among the Mohave.⁸⁸ His ethnography suffers from a rigidly Freudian and essentialist framework, but is remarkably detailed.⁸⁹ To summarize: the Mohave recognized two biological sexes⁹⁰ but four genders with nearly total symmetry. A child born with a penis could become a man or an *alyhaa*, while a child born with a vulva could become a woman or a *hwamee*. Each of the four genders had its own initiation rite.⁹¹ Like men and women, *alyhaa* and *hwamee* entered into brief relationships as well as marriages. When married, *alyhaa* were called by the normal term for wives and *hwamee* by the normal term for husbands. *Alyhaa* had sex only with men: they were the penetrated/passive partners in oral and anal intercourse.⁹² *Hwamee* had sex only with women: they used their fingers as well as duplicating the position of men on top in intercourse.⁹³ The third gender statuses of Indian *hijra* and Navajo

88 At Parker, Arizona and Needles, California in 1932. See also Kroeber 1925.748–49. A similar system was found among the closely linguistically related Quechan and Maricopa (River Yuman) and the more distant Ti-pai (Kamia, Mexican Digueño) and Cocopa (both Delta-California subfamily of Yuman): Quechan *elxaa*, Maricopa *ilyahay*, Cocopa *elha*, Mohave *alyhaa*; Quechan *kweerhame*, Maricopa *kwirahame*, Cocopa *warhameh*, Tipai *warhami*, Mohave *hwamee*. See Forde 1931.157, Drucker 1937.27, 49, Spier 1933.242–43, Drucker 1941.163, 218, Gifford 1933.294, Gifford 1931.12, 56, 79–80, Roscoe 1998.144–49. I have used the practical (phonemic) orthography, now standard, for all the Yuman languages and retranscribed the older (phonological) records; see Gordon 1986.6–14; for an overview, Ortiz 1983.8–11. Devereux 1937.511 and Herdt 1991.498, 500 make much of the fact that his Mohave informants used “he” of *hwamee* and “she” of *alyhaa*, but this was only in English conversation; Mohave (and Yuman languages in general) have no gender marking at all.

89 Devereux 1937. See Herdt 1991, 1993b.65, Roscoe 1993.359–70 and 1998.137–65 for excellent interpretations. See the sensitive criticisms of Herdt 1991.490–94.

90 Devereux 1937.147: “No mention is made of any physiological deformity in homosexuals,” i.e., *alyhaa* or *hwamee*.

91 Kroeber 1925.749 stated that there was no ceremony for *hwamee*, but Devereux’s informants said that it was similar to that for the *alyhaa*, but had not been performed for many years (1937.507, 508).

92 Fellatio and anal intercourse with women were also common practices; cunnilingus was not: Devereux 1937.514–15.

93 The only proper position for men with women: Devereux 1937.517.

nádlee incorporate elements that are marked as both male and as female in their cultures, but are direct duplications of neither. The Mohave *alyhaa* and *hwamee*, on the other hand, closely imitate the gender attributes of women and men respectively. *Alyhaa* cut themselves to simulate menstruation, while *hwamee* were believed to menstruate infrequently if at all, but did observe all the proper taboos when their wives were menstruating. *Alyhaa* had elaborate fake pregnancies. Since the Mohave believed that the paternity of a embryo could be altered by intercourse subsequent to pregnancy, *hwamee* were considered the fathers of children born to their wives.⁹⁴ Here again it is meaningless to label the husbands of *alyhaa* and the wives of *hwamee* “homosexual,” although, in our native classification, their sexual acts might count as such. From the Mohave point of view, the husband of an *alyhaa* is a perfectly normal man, the wife of a *hwamee* is a perfectly normal woman.⁹⁵ More to the point, the *alyhaa* is a perfectly normal *alyhaa*, the *hwamee* is a perfectly normal *hwamee*.⁹⁶

Many people (even anthropologists) inevitably ask at this point: “Yes, but don’t these various groups know that the *berdache*, etc., are *really* men or *really* women.” But it is the word “really” that is the giveaway; all it means is that we are still trying to force other peoples’ categories to fit our version of what counts as “real.” Obviously most people know that *most* people have a penis or a vulva, but, in fact, a particular culture may *not* know or, more significantly, care whether any particular individual of a particular gender class has a penis or a vulva or something else.⁹⁷ It is simply false to

94 As *pater* (not *genitor*); see Barnard 1994.789–94, an interesting example of what counts as reproduction.

95 Devereux 1937.507, 513. Devereux noted some mockery of *alyhaa* and *hwamee* (510–11, 512, but denies its prevalence at 518), and more of the husbands of *alyhaa* and wives of *hwamee* (513, 514, 515, 518–19), but he seems largely to have misunderstood the meaning and social role of the joking (see, however, 513); see Greenberg 1985, Herdt 1991.498–99, Williams 1992.39–40.

96 A similar system of four genders operated among the Chukchi (Siberia). The evidence in Bogoras 1904–09.448–57 was correctly interpreted by Martin and Voorhies 1975.102–04. Bogoras describes what are four distinct gender statuses (with lexical markers), but, in the course of discussing “Sexual Perversion and Transformed Shamans,” adds two types of male cross-dressing for magical purposes. This has led to misstatements by Jacobs and Roberts 1989.440, Jacobs and Cromwell 1992.50–53, Roscoe 1998.203.

97 See n. 85 above, on the Navajo. So Mohaves were uncertain whether *hwamee* menstruate or not (Devereux 1937.510, 517). Among the Chukchi, “some of the ‘soft men’ are said to lose altogether the man’s desire and in the end to even acquire the organs of a woman”; the husband of one “soft man” looked forward to the change, and another “soft man” said he had borne two sons after being impregnated by his spirit-husband (Bogoras 1904–08.451, 453).

say of these third or even fourth gender categories, “But of course, the natives know that they are *really* men (or women).” Sue-Ellen Jacobs, reporting on her field work at San Juan Pueblo, New Mexico, describes the difficulties people encounter in trying to get foreigners to understand even the most elementary ideas. She met a young man who was upset and asked him (in English) why (Jacobs and Cromwell 1992:55):

“They called me a homosexual, they called me a bisexual, they even called me a trisexual. And it hurts damnit, because I don’t do those things!” I understood all his terms until he got to “trisexual,” so I asked him to tell me what each meant. Here are his definitions:

homosexual—“it means I have sex with other men”

heterosexual—“it means I have sex with women”

bisexual—“it means I have sex with men and women”

trisexual—“it means I have sex with women, men, and with Joe [pseudonym].”

Jacobs learned that the Tewa use a distinct third gender category, called *kwidó* (*quetho*).⁹⁸ *Kwidó* are not men, not women. They are “born that way,” because their genitals were exposed to the full moon in infancy. *Kwidó* should be raised to be “who they are” within their families with the aid of other adult *kwidó*. Jacobs asked various Tewa elders about the *kwidó* (Jacobs in Callendar and Kochems 1983:460):

When [I asked] about the genitals of *quethos* (a hard subject to pursue because of the sense of privacy that prevails on such matters in normal conversation, though it is a subject of jokes in other situations), I was told that *quethos* are “like men and women in their private parts” . . . Although the Tewa elders with whom I have spoken would not assign a male or female sex to *quetho*, I pushed

98 *Quetho* is Jacobs’s earlier transcription. Williams 1992:82 cites as *kwih-doh*, but his informant was not a native speaker. This is not a matter about which the Pueblos talk openly. It almost certainly contains the root for “woman,” cf. Tewa (San Juan) *kwee*, “woman,” *kwiyo*, “old woman, wife” (also the abstract for “old age” as applied to women: Martinez 1982:19, 11). Further complicating matters, male and female speech are distinct in Rio Grande Valley Tewa (Kroskrity 1983).

the point further on a number of occasions, asking if women were ever *quethos*. The answer was no.

If Jacobs had stopped there she would have returned with the ethnocentric (and totally false) information that only men could be Tewa *berdaches*. However, she continued pressing:

Then I asked if men were the only ones who were *quethos*. Again, the answer was no. In trying to force a categorization of *quethos* as women or men (or female or male), I only exasperated my Tewa friends, who do make a clear distinction between *quethos*, homosexuals (gay men and women), women, men, and those who on ceremonial occasions dress in the attire of their opposite sex.⁹⁹

For our society, to make a type of thought experiment, if a Greek or Roman anthropologist were to ask, “Yes, but don’t you know that what you call a ‘homosexual’ is *really* a *cinaedus*, that is, a *passive* in your language,” we would respond that we *know* nothing of the sort. We may have straight friends (we are everywhere and not just in the obvious professions), but it is extremely unlikely that we *know* whether the men practice cunnilingus on their female lovers. We may have gay friends, but it is extremely unlikely that we *know* whether they are always top, always bottom, or change about. We do not *know*, because it does not *matter*. However important what we do in the bedroom may be to our private lives, who is active and who is passive is irrelevant to our classification. Male *cunnilingi* do not march in gay pride parades. Men who like to have women stick a finger in their anus during intercourse will not be beaten up by policemen lurking outside the bars that cater to men of their depraved tastes. The ancient anthropologist would have completely missed what was important to us.

99 According to Jacobs, *kwidó* have sex with men, women, and other *kwidó*; this last would be, as far as I know, unique in the various reported forms of *berdache*; in the available explicit evidence, members of the various third and fourth gender classes do not have sex with members of their same class.

The Tewa diagram shows the difficulties of taking “sex” as an autonomous area independent of “gender.” In biological terms (i.e., *etic*, i.e., our terms), the Tewa seem to acknowledge only two types of genitals (“like men and women in their private parts”), yet the genitals of *kwidó* are different, having been marked by the moon. Do the Tewa then acknowledge two sexes or three?

Let us look at a final example of a culture that makes distinctions among sexual activities by drawing lines in totally different places than we do. I have chosen the Chewa of Malawi (an agricultural Bantu people) because there is a direct connection to classics. Caroline Alexander wrote an article in *The New Yorker* (12/16/91) called "Teaching the Classics in Malawi." While reading Catullus, Mr. Mwale, one of her students, asked her, "Is it not strange to you, Madame, that history has preserved the complete . . . um . . . *corpus* of such a notorious pervert?" (73). Now any European classicist would *naturally* assume that any talk of Catullus as a "pervert" must be a reference to his "homosexuality." But when Alexander asked him what he meant, Mr. Mwale replied, "The poet, Madame, involved himself with an older woman, and for that he could only be called a pervert." The Chewa draw sharp distinctions on the basis of age and power. Alexander elicited the information from her class that "a man, therefore, who would deliberately put himself in the unnatural position of having to defer to a woman [because she was the elder] was obviously a pervert." If we smile at Mr. Mwale for misunderstanding Catullus, let us do the same for all the scholars who, with equal cultural ignorance, speak of ancient "homosexuality."

Our division of hetero versus homo then, however vital to our society, to our visions of ourselves, is a parochial affair. To return to the linguistic model, if we impose our categories on another culture, we are making a crude mistake. When it comes to "talking sex," we are at best speaking with an atrocious accent. At worst, we are speaking incomprehensible gibberish.

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