

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and  
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

Spring 1999

**Review of *Two Spirit People: American Indian Lesbian Women  
and Gay Men* Edited by Lester B. Brown**

Carolyn Epple  
*Arizona State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Epple, Carolyn, "Review of *Two Spirit People: American Indian Lesbian Women and Gay Men* Edited by Lester B. Brown" (1999). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 433.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/433>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

**Two Spirit People: American Indian Lesbian Women and Gay Men.**  
Edited by Lester B. Brown. New York: Haworth Press, 1997. xxiv+116 pp.  
Notes, references, index. \$29.95 cloth (ISBN 0-7890-0003-2), \$12.95 paper  
(ISBN 1-56023-089-4).

Lester Brown's edited volume acquaints social workers with "two-spirits," that is, those Native Americans who are "gay," "lesbian," or who may adopt mixed-gender practices and roles. Although well-intended, the attempts to sensitize social workers to Natives' lives are occasionally thwarted by overgeneralizations and weak analyses.

In the three chapters on identity, the intricacies of culture, gender, and sexuality theory are watered down and confused. In their comparison of Lakota and Dakota practices, Little Crow, Judy Wright, and Brown conjure the odd label "non-heterosexual gender identity" and collapse gender into sexuality. Mary Ann Jacobs and Lester Brown's piece often homogenizes the "American Indian," although the authors' interviews with eight Native American lesbians and gays demonstrate a rich diversity of identities and experiences.

A critical perspective is also noticeably absent. The challenge that gender liminality poses to dominant binary gender norms is not pursued. Consequently, social work's gender norms, and hence its normative nature overall, are left unexplored. Brown's literature review is superficial and invokes earlier theories of sexual/moral evolution. "American Indians had very simple beliefs about human sexuality," he writes, and describes their "sexual expression" as "polymorphously perverse."

The subsequent sections, however, offer some balance. Katrina Walters's chapter is an exceptional analysis of the complex interplay of sexual and ethnic identities. Wright, Lopez, and Zumwalt's use of Native American literature to portray "Native" issues is eloquent. The authors err, however, in stating that "American Indian homelessness" is an unstigmatized "wandering," akin to tribal migrations. For at least one Navajo "two-spirit" friend of mine, homelessness was not an essentialized wanderlust but the effect of poverty, despair, alcohol, and racism.

The two chapters on HIV/AIDS—Rowell's description of HIV+ Native Americans' experiences and DePoy and Bolduc's account of a Native American HIV/AIDS project in Maine—demonstrate the importance of community sensitivity and collaboration. These chapters highlight the impact of AIDS on Native Americans, the incidence rate of which in persons thirteen years or older (ten per 100,000) is now similar to that of non-Hispanic whites (eleven per 100,000).

Although this volume is problematic, some of the blame rests with how anthropologists, of which I am one, have constructed the "two-spirit" concept. We have equated Native sexual and gender practices with Euro-Western meanings of "gayness" or "institutionalized homosexuality," a point Brown and others in the volume rightly criticize. We have created a "third

gender” from the template of Euro-Western sex/gender assumptions, wherein we relegate ambiguity (that is, mixed-gender attributes) to the status of “other” or “alternative” or “two-spirit” and keep man and woman in rigid opposition. And we have proclaimed “two-spirit” as the new categorical designation, although the term lacks relevance in the gender or cosmological ideologies of many peoples.

By using the terms “alternatively gendered lifestyle” and “two-spirit,” Brown and others have inherited these conceptual problems and compounded them by overlooking relevant gender, culture, and critical theory. Still, poignant and complex depictions of Native Americans’ gender, sexual, familial, and community experiences emerge, such as in Walters’s and Rowell’s chapters. It is here in the variations and messiness of human life, and not in the rubrics of overglossed sociological categories, that the exigencies of being a Native American and “gay” or “lesbian” or “two-spirit” become clearest. **Carolyn Epple**, *Department of Anthropology, Arizona State University*.