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1998

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SEXUALITY, GENDER, AND IDENTITY IN GREAT PLAINS HISTORY AND MYTH

PETER BOAG

Within just the last few years there has been an explosion in the interest in, and the publication of, gay and lesbian studies. One of the most vibrant fields in the discipline of history today is the history of sexuality. But with all the effort expended in this area of scholarship, there has not been much of an attempt to integrate gay, lesbian, and sexual history into regional history and regionalism. This essay is an attempt to introduce regional history to sexual history. It takes as its subject “non-heterosexuals” and tries to make sense of their history within the context of the Great

Plains region. Because myths (such as “rain follows the plow,” the Great American Desert, the Garden of the World, and the Golden Kingdom of Quivira) have been so important in determining Great Plains history and therefore its regional identity, this study uses a few of the most compelling Great Plains myths as one way to understand the history of the region’s sexual minorities. Such an approach permits a better understanding of why non-heterosexuals have traditionally been left out of Great Plains histories; it also affords us a way to integrate them into it. The desire here is not so much to offer any hard and fast conclusions about the non-heterosexual history of the Great Plains. Rather, the goal here, besides integrating regionalism with the history of sexuality, is to encourage debate, reflection, and further investigation on the part of students of the Great Plains and the American West.

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THE GARDEN DEFILED

In 1541 the conquistador Francisco Vásquez de Coronado became the first European to journey into the heart of the Great Plains.

Stories of emeralds, gold, and great cities, as well as the deeply held European myth that somewhere on the American continents there existed a lost garden where living was easy, all lured Coronado into the region. The journey started as a voyage chasing myth; it ended in dashed hopes for the conquistador when he and his men halted their expedition among the Caddoan-speaking Wichita of present-day central Kansas.

For understanding European history of the Great Plains, the motivation behind Coronado's journey is more important than the expedition's result. Of course, there exist other versions of the meaning behind Coronado's journey. For the Native people, for example, this conquistador's voyage was one of force, punishment, and murder. In the long run, Coronado's *entrada* symbolized doom for these people's way of life. Importantly for the history of sexuality in the Great Plains region, this way of life included a far more relaxed attitude toward and acceptance of a greater variety in humans' sexual expressions and roles than Europeans then and even now embrace. Indeed, whereas Europeans of the early modern era deemed most expressions of sexuality as sinful, the historian and anthropologist Walter L. Williams tells us that to a good many Native American cultures, sex was not solely for procreative purposes. It was not necessarily restricted to marriage. And it was not confined just to members of the opposite sex. Rather, Native peoples viewed sex as "a gift from the spirit world, to be enjoyed and appreciated." Many American Indian cultures, including those that spread from the Prairie and western Great Lakes to the northern and central Plains and down through the lower Mississippi Valley, had even established the category of the berdache for physical males who did not fit the standard masculine character, and who might also participate in sex with men. The berdache had accepted roles to play in society, had appeared in tribal mythology, and had often achieved levels of social and spiritual prestige. The berdache actually occupied a third gender. Some Native

American cultures also allowed for women who did not fit the typical feminine role, who appropriated a masculine character, and even took other women for wives.¹

In terms of sexual expression, it is of course inaccurate to romanticize the precontact period as a golden era lost. But it seems reasonable to declare that for those who did not fall under the standard European definitions of masculinity and femininity, Native cultures of the central and northern Plains valued, appreciated, and even honored them. These same cultures accepted expressions of same-sex sexual practices. In this sense, the pre-European Plains was a garden of sorts. The stories of various early Great Plains visitors give credence to this claim. Frenchman Victor Tixier, who traveled the West for romantic curiosity in 1840, stayed with Natives of the Plains that summer. His travelogue describes the rather open and lax attitudes of, for example, the Osage people toward sex and sexual matters. Though distressing to himself, Tixier noted that, among other things, the Osages countenanced "habits of sodomy." In 1819-20, T. Say, while on an expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rockies, spent time with the Kansa near Omaha. He recalled that "Sodomy is . . . not uncommonly committed; many of the subjects of it are publicly known, and do not appear despised, or to excite disgust; one of them was pointed out to us; he had submitted himself to it, in consequence of a vow he had made to his mystic medicine." And the writings of Edwin Thompson Denig, who lived among the Native peoples of the Upper Missouri between 1833 and 1856, recapitulate the remarkable story of a Gros Ventre-Crow woman who was inclined to "manly accomplishments." She became a proficient hunter, a noted warrior, a courageous negotiator, and a chief only third in ranking among 160 lodges. She even took herself a wife. Denig declared, "Strange country this, where males assume the dress and perform the duties of females, while women turn men and mate with their own sex!"²

These descriptions come from the nineteenth century, several hundred years after the arrival of Coronado. Obviously, European prescription against the Natives' relatively lax sexual and gender attitudes required some years to penetrate the Plains. But Coronado's visit in 1541 opened the doors. Scholars have proposed that sodomy and homosexuality—same-sex activities the Christian God condemned as crimes—provided “a major justification” for the Spanish conquest and subjugation of the New World. And indeed, where the Spanish went, so too did their ethnocentric views. A Spanish official celebrated Vasco Núñez de Balboa as a “fine . . . honorable . . . Catholic Spaniard” because while on his raid through Latin America he “saw men dressed like women . . . learnt that they were sodomites and threw the[m] . . . to be eaten by his dogs.” Cabeza de Vaca labeled one man “devilish” whom he had seen married to another, going “about dressed as a woman, and doing women’s tasks.” In the 1770s Spanish Franciscans in California punished Indian men for committing “the nefarious sin” and dreamed of the day when these men, whom the Spaniard’s designated “accursed people,” would “disappear with the growth of the missions.” Native women did not escape the Spanish dragnet either. The Catholic priest Francisco de Pareja worked in his confessional in early-seventeenth-century Florida to ferret out women who had sex with other women, acting as if they were “a man.”³

In recent years, New Western historians have argued that the American West is best understood as a place of conquest—a place where competing races, ethnic groups, languages, cultures, religions, and economies have struggled with one another for dominance. Yet even the bible of New Western history, Patricia Nelson Limerick’s *The Legacy of Conquest*, fails to mention the profound sexual struggle that has also taken place here—an omission that helps perpetuate the myth that non-heterosexuals were not part of this history.⁴ It is certainly accepted that Coronado’s march into the heart of the Great Plains in 1541 did inaugurate European and Native American con-

test for this space. Less considered is the point of view that Coronado’s processional also marked the onset of a history in which those who lived sexual lives unacceptable to European tradition fell victim to both sword and pen. Coronado’s processional also signaled the beginning of a history that projected a mythical heterosexual garden onto the Great Plains, a garden in which non-heterosexuals were no longer welcome in their former home.

THE HETEROSEXUAL GARDEN AND THE HOMOSEXUAL IMPULSE

While we can trace the origins of the Garden of the World myth far back into early American and even European history, it was Thomas Jefferson who, more than any other, transformed it into early American political canon. Jefferson also vigorously promoted it as a paradigm for the future course of American society. Assuredly, the Garden of the World came to play a significant role in Great Plains history. For example, it guided Jefferson’s justification for the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory. It also informed his instructions to the Lewis and Clark Expedition as it explored the upper Missouri. Subsequently, it influenced the Homestead Act, found its way into booster literature, motivated settlement of the Plains, and continuously gave hope to farmers there and elsewhere in the West, even following repeated failure in the region’s subhumid and arid environments.⁵

One can make the argument that the Garden of the World is a heterosexual myth. It embraced an agricultural republic composed of small, family farms, ever expanding westward through natural reproduction. The central figure was the yeoman. Chosen by God, he represented independence, the ingredient necessary for ensuring the survival of democracy. This yeoman also headed a family, whose other members (wife and children) were, ironically, subservient to and dependent on him. As Jefferson and others rendered it, this mythical garden would offer no sanctuary for

workshops, industrial operatives, the mobs of urban areas, independent women, and of course Native American cultures. With Indians vanquished, women subordinated to husbands, no cities in sight, and idealized family farms everywhere, this myth effectively excluded non-heterosexuals from the garden—the garden which, as a myth, has so determined Great Plains, Western, and American history.⁶

It is important to note that at the time Jefferson refined his republican ideology, western society did not have the understanding we have today of heterosexual and homosexual. Back then, one could engage in homosexual acts—considered sins and crimes—but one's actions did not necessitate a specific sexual identity as such actions more likely would today. It was only at the end of the nineteenth century that heterosexual and homosexual categories and identities emerged. This was due to a complex process which other historians are beginning to explain but which cannot be recapitulated here. What is important to consider, however, is that while Jefferson's and nineteenth-century Americans' views did not distinguish a homosexual identity, nonetheless those who participated in homosexual acts, and those who may have had homosexual affinities according to later-day standards, were nonetheless not acceptable in the Garden of the World myth. For example, Thomas Jefferson himself had prescribed castration as a punishment for sodomy. Sacrificing historical accuracy for ease of discussion, this essay carefully utilizes the term non-heterosexual as a catchall for those who did not follow gender-acceptable appearances or sexual practices as the dominant society defined them in the nineteenth century.⁷

Excluded from one of the Great Plains' dominant myths and then later omitted from the region's Old Western and even New Western written histories, non-heterosexuals have nonetheless made this place their home. Typical was the case that sanction forced them to construct lives of illusion, creating their own mythical existences by which they could endure the hard realities of this garden. Such a

scenario is borne out in the testimony of the nineteenth-century journalist and one-time presidential candidate, Horace Greeley. On 29 May 1859, while in eastern Colorado at Station 9 on the Pikes Peak Express, Greeley reported a pleasant conversation at supper time with a young clerk, who had come west for the gold rush. Greeley related that his young dinner partner, "having frozen his feet on the winter journey out, had had enough of gold-hunting, and was going home to his parents in Indiana, to stick to school for a few years." The next day, as Greeley and the young clerk parted company, the latter heading east and the former west, Greeley "was apprised by our conductor that said clerk was a woman! I had not dreamed of such a thing; but his more practical or suspicious eyes had seen through her disguise at once." In the same year and also in Colorado, traveler and writer Albert Richardson also reported of women similar to the one Greeley had chance to meet: "I encountered in the diggings several women dressed in masculine apparel, and each telling some romantic story of her past life. One averred that she had twice crossed the plains to California with droves of cattle." What was the sexuality of these women? The sources do not reveal. But Greeley reported of his acquaintance, "We heard more of her at Denver—quite enough more—but this may as well be left untold" Richardson reacted with far more disgust: "Some were adventurers; all were of the wretched class against which society shuts its iron doors, bidding them hasten uncared-for to destruction."⁸ Greeley's and Richardson's responses more than strongly intimate that there was more to these women than met the eye. Clearly, whatever it was—possibly same-sex sexual escapades—the two men could not report it. They could only condemn it—at best with silence, at worst with hopes of destruction for these cross-dressers.

As mysterious as these Western women were, even more enigmatic—and surprisingly so because we know much more about her—is one of the most famous women of the Great Plains, the novelist Willa Cather. Like the

women who donned male attire and headed west in search of gold, Cather, too, led a life and wrote fiction that rebelled against both the feminine stereotype and the garden myth. Partly because Cather burned all the personal papers she could lay her hands on before she died, scholars have been unable to determine her sexuality. In fact, the fiercest battles over Cather in recent years have revolved around this elusive fact of her life. Some wish desperately for her to remain firmly in the heterosexual fold, others feel that Cather's most intimate secrets hold the key to understanding her work.⁹

Probably because scholars have been more concerned with Cather's heterosexuality or homosexuality, they have ignored the possibility that the author may have been transgendered. "Transgendered" is a term that has an even more recent origin than heterosexual and homosexual. Whereas gay men identify with the male gender and lesbians identify with the female gender, one who is transgendered is physically of a sex opposite that with which he or she identifies. That "transgendered" is of very recent origin might in some ways preclude its use as a term for referring to individuals who lived in earlier times, for example, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. So one must use caution when suggesting transgenderism for Cather. But it is interesting to consider the evidence. For example, in the 1880s, when she was between the ages of fourteen and eighteen—the adolescent years when sexuality awakens and young people supposedly learn so much about their proper roles—Cather boldly took on a male persona. At this significant age, she renamed herself William Cather Jr., cropped short her hair, and donned boyish clothes.¹⁰ Naturally, she became quite the subject of gossip in her hometown of Red Cloud, Nebraska. Being transgendered is, of course, more than just changing one's outer appearance, but in her youth—as she would in various ways throughout the rest of her life—Cather defied the prescribed feminine role for that which was stereotypically more masculine.

Whether lesbian, transgendered, or just eccentric, Cather challenged her society's "normal" sexual roles and expectations. She fell outside the boundaries of what dominant society had approved of and constructed for people, whether on the Great Plains or elsewhere in the America of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Not surprisingly, from both a realistic and non-heterosexual vantage, the stories Cather related in her novels about the Great Plains often defied the image of family farms, male-female unions, the heroic yeoman, blissful labor in the earth, and democracy—those things Henry Nash Smith called "the promise of American life" and which are the hallmarks of the Garden of the World myth. In Cather's most popular novel, *My Ántonia*, Mrs. Shimerda declared "America big country; much money, much land for my boys, much husband for my girls." But the reality for Ántonia, the Shimerdas, and a host of other characters was a life filled with extreme hardship and brutality, the loss of farms, homesickness for the Old Country, young women working in the fields and hiring themselves out to help support the family, the hint of infanticide, and, for many, escape from the countryside to the towns and cities that Thomas Jefferson spoke so boldly against in his garden myth.¹¹

The pages of *My Ántonia* are similarly filled with characters whose lives and sexuality do not fit the more socially acceptable standards of the day. Ántonia took pride in the labor she did in the fields and how it transformed her: "Oh, better I like to work out-of-doors than in a house!" she declared "I not care that . . . it makes me like a man. I like to be a man." Then there was little Sally Harling who "always dressed like a boy," wore her hair short, and was "uncannily clever at boys' sports." Frances Harling looked like her father. And as a creditor—a job that was her patrimony—she outfoxed men, including the corrupt and evil Wick Cutter. Cutter himself was "fastidious and prim. . . . It was a peculiar combination of old-maidishness and licentiousness that made Cutter seem so despicable." Tiny Soderball

left Nebraska for the Alaskan gold rush, developed a claim, made a fortune, and retired to San Francisco, where she remained single. She was later joined there by Lena Lingard, who once declared that "I'm not going to marry anybody . . . mainly because I don't want a husband. Men are all right for friends." There was also the interesting relationship between the Russians, Peter and Pavel, companions who cohabited on the Nebraska Plains. Cather wrote that their home was "neat . . . very comfortable for two men who were 'batching.' Besides the kitchen, there was a living-room, with a wide double bed built against the wall, properly made up with blue gingham sheets and pillows." Peter was the more "docile" and domestic of the two, he kept the garden, washed the clothes, ran the kitchen. And finally there was of course the narrator of the story, Jim Burden, the voice of Cather, and a most androgynous young man. He seems to have no male friends. Rather, when not playing with *Ántonia* and the Harling girls, he preferred solitude and aloneness. And at once Burden declared of himself, "People said there must be something queer about a boy who showed no interest in girls of his own age."¹²

My *Ántonia* is a story of deep yet unrequited love between Jim and *Ántonia*. If Jim truly speaks the words of Cather, as some have proposed, then Cather here immortalized her passion for women. But more to the point, with and through these multidimensional and gendered characters, Cather's non-heterosexual vantage, breadth of vision, and sympathy allow her to speak to many as she explores a world where more traditional attitudes toward gender fail as categories of description and understanding.

Cather's life and semiautobiographical stories offer a real and non-heterosexual counterpoint to Jefferson's mythic Garden of the World. Yet there are other nineteenth-century sexual realities which also undermine the garden's stability as a metaphor for the sexual history of the Plains. Consider the example of the Plains' large same-sex community of cowboys whose members could and apparently did

develop strong emotional ties with one another. Evidence shows that they might even engage in same-sex sexual activities. The cowboy Badger Clark, who was born in Iowa in 1883 and grew up in South Dakota, wrote in the early twentieth century "The Lost Pardner," a romantic ballad dedicated to a lost male love. Among its verses are, "We loved each other in the way men do / And never spoke about it, Al and me, / But we both *knowed*, and knowin' it so true / Was more than any woman's kiss could be." And Manuel Boyfrank, who worked on the cattle ranges of Oklahoma in 1909, averred that from his experience cowboys engaged in homosexual sex. They "paired off. . . . At first they'd solace each other gingerly and, as bashfulness waned, manually. As trust in mutual good will matured, they'd graduate to the ecstatically comforting 69." Importantly, cowboys' attraction to each other could be more than just for sex, according to Boyfrank, as "cockulation [i.e., physical attraction to another male] was at first rooted in admiration, infatuation, a sensed need of an ally, loneliness and yearning, but it regularly ripened into love. Love is no urge to conquer or just use a man."¹³

The Garden of the World myth neither predicted nor countenanced Clark's and Boyfrank's same-sex communities of cowboys which variously occupied the Plains. Neither did it allow for urbanization. But as large cities began to appear on the Plains by the end of the nineteenth century, they became the havens for same-sex-identified people who, amidst the anonymity the city afforded, were able to seek each other out and form the region's first modern gay and lesbian communities. In the years 1910-19, a university professor in Denver reported knowing "quite a number of homosexuals" there. He was acquainted, for example, with "five musicians, three teachers, three art dealers, one minister, one judge, two actors, one florist, and one women's tailor." He also knew with certainty some students on the campus where he taught were gay, and he had noticed a number of students who otherwise portrayed "all the

characteristics” often ascribed to homosexuals. This informant reported on social gatherings for gays where some of his friends appeared in women’s clothing. And he variously commented that homosexual contacts could be made on Denver’s streets and at the local YMCA. He did conclude, however, that although male prostitution was uncommon in Denver, they could still “sometimes be met in the Capitol Gardens.”¹⁴

Such a description of the number of Denver’s male prostitutes was not an accurate depiction for all times in that city’s history. Newspapers reported there as early as the 1880s that poverty enticed into a life of prostitution men and particularly large numbers of boys who came to the city from San Francisco and the East. Although in 1885 the *Denver Tribune* was referring to the specific problem of the pervasiveness of the street urchins and their crimes, and not simply their role in male prostitution, it reported that the situation in Denver “quite destroy[ed] the idyllic pastoral nonsense so universally preached and quoted everywhere about the purity and innocence of everything in this country.”¹⁵ The newspaper might as well have spoken directly of the relationship between the realities of the homosexual impulse and the mythic quality of the heterosexual Garden of the World.

JOURNEYS: SAME-SEX LOVE AND DESIRE ON THE WESTERN PLAINS

In 1948 the Indiana-based sexologist Alfred C. Kinsey released his study *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. This publication made quite a sensation: it spent twenty-seven weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, it shocked conventional sexual and moral values, it revealed that homosexual behavior and homosexuals were more common than believed, it criticized the psychiatric community for labeling homosexuals psychopaths, and it inadvertently worked to encourage the federal witch-hunt for “perverts” and communists in the early 1950s. Kinsey’s path-breaking, revealing, and in some ways positive report about

homosexuality also helped crystallize the modern gay rights movement. Even today within the gay community Kinsey has been elevated to hero status because of his work, which confirmed homosexuality as normal and called for tolerance. In *Sexual Behavior*, Kinsey occasionally turned his attention to homosexual men and the situation for homosexual expression in rural and western America. For example, while he reported that rural America lacked the institutions that were at the center of urban gay community—establishments such as taverns, night clubs, restaurants, and baths—he also noted that “the highest frequencies of the homosexual” which his study has “ever secured anywhere have been in particular rural communities in some of the more remote sections of the country.”¹⁶

For all the accolades one might heap on Kinsey, it should not go unmentioned that a reading of his treatment of homosexuality, especially its occurrence in remote, rural America, reveals a note of misunderstanding on his part. Rather than homosexuality here being a naturally occurring phenomenon and leaving it at that, the scientist Kinsey found it necessary to explain why it does occur. His reasoning is insufficient. Kinsey argues that it is because boys on isolated farms have few companions except brothers and male cousins, boys from neighboring farms, and older farmhands, and importantly because they are kept away from girls—an outlet which, though Kinsey does overtly say so, would seem to be these boys’ natural choice. For older males in “Western rural areas,” their propensity for same-sex activities Kinsey chalks up or “attributes” to his belief that they “live on realities” rather than on “theory” and that “[s]uch a background breeds an attitude of sex is sex, irrespective of the nature of the partner.” Kinsey argued that western men have “sexual relations with women when they are available,” but when they are not they turn to other men.¹⁷ Overall, Kinsey gives the impression that western boys and men would seek out another for sex only because of an absence of women.

In a sense, while Kinsey's work from the first half of the twentieth century importantly recognized the existence of non-heterosexuals in rural, western settings, it still excluded from the region the possibility that primary, inherent same-sex desire and same-sex love were motivating factors in their intimate relationships. But even without Kinsey's confirmation, we know that certain forms of same-sex desire and love were potent forces in the rural West in even earlier times than his study dealt with. The following examples from the Great Plains give credence to this claim.

In 1885 Elizabeth Bacon Custer, George Armstrong Custer's wife, wrote about her 1870s experiences in Dakota Territory in her book *Boots and Saddles*. Among other stories related, Custer tells of a laundress named "Old Nash" who worked for the army for ten years.¹⁸ Before joining with Custer's regiment in Kentucky in 1868, Old Nash, of Mexican ethnicity, reportedly had lost her two children to death in her home country and had experienced "a rough life . . . even dressing as a man in order to support herself by driving ox-teams over the plains to New Mexico." Once the railroads replaced the oxcart, Old Nash was thrown out of work, resumed women's dress, found the life of a laundress easier, and entered the army. Her heartbreak was by no means ended at this point, for over the course of the next few years the laundress married two troopers who stole her hard-earned money and deserted her, never to be seen again.

According to Custer, Old Nash also was homely. With a note of ethnocentrism Custer related that because Old Nash was Mexican, she was rather hairy, having "so coarse and stubborn a beard that her chin had a blue look after shaving, in marked contrast to her swarthy face." At first Old Nash kept her visage hidden with a veil carefully pinned over the lower part. But later, after losing her second husband, she began attending soldiers' dances "dressed in gauzy, low necked-gowns. Nonetheless, Old Nash remained, according to Custer, "tall, angular, awkward," even giraffe-like, and had an "architectural build with

massive features." Despite all this, in Dakota Old Nash "captured the handsomest soldier in the company." Perhaps it was because she had a tender heart, her past troubles having "softened her nature." Perhaps it was something else. The two married, took up residence together, and their life seemed blessed with marital bliss. Old Nash affectionately called her husband "manny manny."

Custer remarked that Old Nash was particularly adept at domestic tasks. As a laundress she "fluted and frilled" the linens "so daintily." Old Nash baked pies for the soldiers and sewed their clothing. For example, she fashioned "manny manny's" attire into an "admirably fitted uniform", "which displayed to advantage his well-proportioned figure." She also transformed a little cabin on Laundress Row into the couple's home. "The bed was hung with pink cambric, and on some shelves she showed us silk and woollen stuffs for gowns, bits of carpet were on the floor, the dresser, improvised out of a packing-box, shone with polished tins." Old Nash was also a proficient midwife and nurse, always interested in her patients' contentment, she "lifted and cared" for them with a "gentle, dexterous manner," and she was certain to inquire with her favorite line: "'Are you comph?'—meaning comfortable."

By 1878, however, Old Nash's life of exposure and hardship in the military and in Dakota, took its toll and "she became ailing and rheumatic." After Custer left the Plains, she learned that when Old Nash's time had come at Fort Meade, the ailing sufferer implored the other camp women who tended her to "put her in the coffin just as she was when she died and bury her at once." But they felt that "such a course would not be . . . proper . . . [and] broke their promise." When the other women prepared Old Nash for the grave, the "mystery which the old creature had guarded for so many years through a life always public and conspicuous, was revealed:" Old Nash was a man. On later reading the news, one of Old Nash's former patients is reported to have declared, "Poor old thing, I hope she is 'comph' at last."

Other than Custer's rather rude physical descriptions of Old Nash and an occasional racist remark, her attitude toward the laundress is somewhat sympathetic—though not exactly empathetic. Certainly, Custer failed to understand completely the true nature of Old Nash and the laundress's relationship with her husband. For example, the reason Custer gives for Old Nash's decision to become a woman was that she had become "weary of the laborious life of a man." This explanation not only violates the true essence of Old Nash but it also undervalues the arduous life of women, especially the working-class western woman Old Nash lived as. Equally questionable is Custer's conclusion that the only reason Old Nash was able to capture her third husband was because she was "a woman of means," having saved up a small fortune from her work. According to Custer, the handsome soldier only "played the part of husband in order to gain possession of his wife's savings and vary the plain fare of the soldier with good suppers."

Although Old Nash's first two husbands may have married her for that reason—for according to reports they certainly ended up stealing from and then abandoning her—evidence suggests that more than just money registered in "manny manny" when he looked into his wife's eyes. Take for instance the tragic events subsequent to Old Nash's death. According to Custer, after the laundress was revealed to have a male body, "manny manny" could endure the "gibes and scoffs of his comrades for only a few days, [and then] life became unbearable to the handsome soldier. . . . he went into one of the company's stables when no one was there and shot himself." The reason for the handsome soldier's suicide is somewhat more complex and multilayered than Custer might lead us to believe. It may very well be, as Custer suggests, that the unfortunate fellow sought escape from the attacks of his comrades through death. But importantly, scholars have noted a historically high incidence of same-sex activities among men in the military, especially in the

nineteenth-century West. And other scholars have argued that at this time, under certain circumstance, working-class men could have sex with other men without their reputations being imperiled. One also has to ask the question, under the living conditions available to the western army and its entourage in the 1870s, how likely is it that Old Nash's secret was unknown, especially when she carried on a series of relationships with different soldiers?¹⁹

In any case, one might wonder why "manny manny" simply did not desert rather than take the extreme measure he did. This would also seem the reasonable solution if the handsome soldier was, as Custer declares, only after Old Nash's money, like her former two husbands who did defect. There is one other probable reason for the tragic ending to this story: "manny manny" took his life because he was grief-stricken over the loss of a partner he loved greatly. Like Alfred Kinsey some years later, Elizabeth Bacon Custer apparently did not understand that deep and abiding love may very well have played a role in same-sex relationships in the West.

Another story that deals with illusion and same-sex love and that also unfortunately ended in tragedy comes from White Oaks, New Mexico Territory, at the very southwestern edge of the Great Plains. It concerns two young women, Jessie Elizabeth Rigley and Portia (Hill) Doyle.²⁰

For some years Portia Hill lived in White Oaks, where she reportedly won the respect and affection "of all who knew her through her sweet face and gentle, quiet dignity." In 1889, when she was still, according to the local newspaper, a "young girl," Portia went to work as a governess for Mrs. Goodin Ellis. Not long afterward, Portia married her employer's brother, Howard Doyle. The two settled down on Doyle's ranch but only after enjoying a short trip back East, presumably for a honeymoon. When they returned from their journey, they also brought news to Mrs. Ellis of a young Miss Jessie Rigley from Liberty, Missouri, who would seem to be a suitable

replacement as governess. Mrs. Ellis quickly sent for Jessie, who upon arrival in New Mexico became "fast friends" with Portia, the latter having the habit of "spending Saturday and Sunday of each week with her dear friend at the home of Mrs. Ellis." Not long after Jessie's arrival on the southern plains, Portia and Howard separated, "the only reason given" was that Portia no longer loved her husband. And although Mrs. Ellis requested Jessie to "use her influence to bring about a reconciliation," Mrs. Ellis later believed that just the opposite occurred.

On Easter morning, 29 March 1891, there urgently rode into White Oaks a messenger "whose pallid face showed him at once to be the betrayer of bad news. Nor did his face belie him." He brought word of the dramatic deaths of Jessie and Portia. The afternoon before, the two young women took a revolver from a table at the Ellises and walked down past a corral fence, where they hung their hats. They neatly folded their cloaks as pillows, pinned letters to their dresses, and lay down in each other's arms. The coroner's report confirmed the deaths as voluntary. Jessie first shot Portia "thro' the heart and then turned the weapon on herself," piercing her own heart as well. Letters dated 16 March led to the grand jury's conclusion that the two young women's "act had been deliberately planned and executed."

The *Lincoln County Leader's* coverage of this extraordinary event relates that the two young women had a "strange infatuation" for each other from the first. But of course it is impossible for us to know much more about them and their love for each other, or about the nature of this "strange infatuation" and the reason for their suicides. Jessie's letter offers her fate as an alternative to a "lingering and painful death." She had suffered consumption in Missouri before heading to New Mexico to take her position with the Ellises. But the record gives no indication of the severity of the malady. Portia's letter remarks that "I think 'all things happen for the best.' Death is sweet." The most we know is that in their farewells

each wrote of the other as "the dearest friend I have on earth." And both beseeched to be buried together, in the same coffin. Jessie included in her note a brief poem:

From my youth upwards
My spirits walked not with the souls of men
Nor looked upon the earth with human eyes.
The things of their ambition were not mine,
My joys, my griefs, my passions and my
 powers
Made me a stranger.

Were the suicides of Custer's handsome soldier, Portia (Hill) Doyle, and Jesse Rigley related to the dominant society's proscription against their love for members of the same-sex? One might conclude such by reading the few lines (and between the few lines) we have about these people, their loves, their lives, and their deaths. But more important is to understand, and to learn from, these people's lives. The best historical records we have of these few individuals comes to us from their journeys onto and across the Great Plains. From these records we can and must reconstruct the realities—both courageous and tragic—of their lives, loves, and emotions so that they and others like them no longer remain illusory in history. Notable in this reality is that these people, and many others, expressed for members of the same-sex romantic and possibly even erotic love, something traditional scholarship has not considered.

RESTORING HISTORY AND THE GARDEN

As noted earlier, one should not fall into the trap of romanticizing the Native American experience, especially when it comes to non-heterosexuals in the precontact era. An Indian story reveals why this is wise. The Wichita people—the Indians Coronado came upon in his fabled Quivira of central Kansas—were speakers of the Caddoan language. An old Caddoan story, which actually comes from the Wichitas' neighbors and relations, the Caddo people, who lived farther down the

Mississippi Valley, tells of a time when there lived among them "a man who always did the women's work and dressed like the women and went with them, and never went with the men. The men made fun of him but he did not care, and continued to work and play with women." When war came, and the warriors left the village, an old man accosted the berdache and told him that he was a disgrace to the tribe because he would not fight with the other men. The berdache responded that "the Great Father did not send him to earth to fight and did not want him to go." Neither the old man nor the others listened to this reasoning. Instead, they threatened him with death. The berdache responded that the people would never succeed in killing him, that he would always return to life, "and would bewitch people and cause them to fight in the tribe." But the people did not believe it and felt that they could not have such a coward living among them. They cornered him, brutally beat him, and thought him dead and ready for burial, but he sprung back to life. They repeated their attack a few more times, and even cut off his head, but they could never kill him. When they "were just about to give up killing him" someone "noticed a small purple spot on the little finger of his left hand. They cut that out; then he lay down and died." It was not long after this that the Caddoes started fighting and quarreling with, and eventually murdering, one another. Families divided, "brothers and sisters and fathers and mothers, . . . Then the old man remembered what the coward had said, and he told the people, and they were all sorry that they had killed him."²¹

It is a strange coincidence that in late-nineteenth-century America, to show interest in having relations with members of their own sex, men would often place a small tattoo of a cross or a dot of India ink between the forefinger and thumb of the left hand.²² The purpose of communicating the Caddo myth is not, of course, to become bogged down in a comparison of body art—a topic which, nonetheless, seems to be increasingly of interest to many today. Rather, it is to relate the point that in

Native America the "non-heterosexual" encountered difficulties. But even the Caddoes eventually realized that the berdache was an important person who had an essential role to play in society. They accepted this individual because ancient story and their own experiences told them they needed to. In a sense, when it comes to non-heterosexual people and sex, the Caddoes may have defiled their own garden long before Coronado paid a visit to their relatives upriver. However, at least the Caddoes made amends and tried to restore the garden: they discovered that the berdache was needed for creating and maintaining peace, harmony, and general good relations between people. Indeed, one of the essential roles the berdache played in Native America was that of the go-between and mediator, especially between the sexes.²³

Although Europeans worked to extinguish much of Native American culture, fortunately a portion of it has been preserved in the Native traditions still alive today and in books wherein are recorded stories such as that of the Caddo berdache related above. This myth explains why it was important that Natives of the Plains and elsewhere honor all things. And it was important for the Caddoes that the story continue to be told so as not to repeat past wrongs and at the same time preserve their own civilization. Perhaps historians of the Great Plains, the American West, and the United States might take a page from the Native Americans' book. It may be that the very act of rewriting and retelling national and regional histories in ways that include those traditionally left out and considered expendable will go a long way toward restoring the American garden.

NOTES

1. Walter L. Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), pp. 2, 3, 88, 131-34, 233-49. On the berdache as a third gender, see also Charles Callender and Leo M. Kochems, "Men and Not-Men: Male Gender-Mixing Statuses and Homosexuality," *Journal of Homosexuality* 11, nos. 3/4

(1985): 165-78. On the berdache in general and other aspects of Native American male and female sexuality, see David F. Greenberg, "Why Was the Berdache Ridiculed?" *Journal of Homosexuality* 11, nos. 3/4 (1985): 179-89; for various primary accounts, Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A., A Documentary History*, rev. ed. (New York: Meridian Books, 1992), pp. 281-334; Robert Lynch, "Seeing Twice: Shamanism, Berdache, and Homoeroticism in American Indian Culture," *Southern Exposure* 13, no. 6 (1985): 90-93; Robert Fulton and Steven W. Anderson, "The Amerindian 'Man-Woman': Gender, Liminality, and Cultural Continuity," *Current Anthropology* 33, no. 5 (1992): 603-10; Paula Gunn Allen, "Lesbians in American Indian Culture" in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990), pp. 106-117; Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); and Will Roscoe, "Bibliography of Berdache and Alternative Gender Roles Among North American Indians," *Journal of Homosexuality* 14, nos. 3/4 (1987): 81-171. For more specifically Great Plains and Prairies studies of the berdache, see Will Roscoe, "That is My Road: The Life and Times of a Crow Berdache," *Montana* 40, no. 1 (1990): 46-55; Raymond E. Hauser, "The Berdache and the Illinois Indian Tribe during the Last Half of the Seventeenth Century," *Ethnohistory* 37, no. 1, (1990): 45-65; and Walter L. Williams, "Persistence and Change in the Berdache Tradition among Contemporary Lakota Indians," *Journal of Homosexuality* 11, nos. 3/4 (1985): 191-200.

2. Victor Tixier, *Travels on the Osage Prairies*, ed. John Francis McDermot (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1940), pp. 181-82; Edwin James, *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains in the Years 1819 and '20* (Philadelphia: H. C. Carey and I. Lea, 1822-23), I: 129, 267, as quoted in *Gay American History* (note 1 above), p. 299; Edwin Thompson Denig, *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri*, ed. and intro. John C. Ewers (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), pp. 195-200.

3. Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh* (note 1 above), pp. 134, 137; Francisco Guerra, *The Pre-Columbian Mind* (London: Seminar Press, 1971), p. 221, as quoted in *The Spirit and the Flesh*, p. 137; Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, "Naufragios de Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca," in *Historiadores primitivos de Indias*, vol. 1, ed. Enrique de Vedia, Biblioteca de autores españoles, vol. 22 (Madrid: M. Rivadeneyra, 1852), p. 538, as quoted in *Gay American History* (note 1 above), p. 285; and Francisco Pareja's 1613 *Confesionario; A Documentary Source*

for *Timucuan Ethnography*, ed. Jerald T. Milanch and William C. Stutevant, trans. Emilio F. Moran (Tallahassee, Fla.: Division of Archives, Florida Dept. of State, 1972), pp. 39, 43, 48, 75, 76, as quoted in *Gay American History* (note 1 above), p. 287. On Spanish missionaries and homosexuality, see also Albert L. Hurtado, "Sexuality in California's Franciscan Missions: Cultural Perceptions and Sad Realities," *California History* 71, no. 3 (1992): 370-85.

4. Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987). Another notable New Western iconoclast to leave non-heterosexuals out the story of the region is Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1991).

5. Thomas Jefferson to John Breckenridge, 21 August 1803, and "Instructions to Captain Lewis, 1803," in *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Viking Press, 1975), pp. 311, 496. For the history of the "Garden of the World" myth, see particularly Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), especially pp. 116-44; and Henry Nash Smith, "The Garden of the World," book 3 of 3, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950), pp. 121-260.

6. For Thomas Jefferson's description of the agricultural republic, see *Notes on the State of Virginia*, "Query XIX. Manufactures," in *The Portable Jefferson* (note 5 above), pp. 216-17. On Jefferson's commitment to the small, family farm, see *The Machine in the Garden* (note 5 above), pp. 126-27. Though historians have long accepted natural reproduction and expansion and the eventual exclusion of Natives as part of the garden of the world metaphor, Jefferson's own allusions to these can be found in, for example, Jefferson to John Breckenridge, 21 August 1803, in *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, p. 496. On the family, wives, and children in the agricultural republic, see Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Richard D. Heffner (New York: Mentor Books, 1956): "Influence of Democracy on Manners Properly so Called," p. 39; "How the Americans Understand the Equality of the Sexes," pp. 233-37, 243-47. Although the Homestead Act of 1862 offered land to single men and women aged twenty-one or older, the act first mentions land for heads of households, demonstrating a possible Congressional bias favoring families on western farms.

Somewhat less imaginative than the Garden of the World's rendering of the history of American occupation of the Great Plains, but still mirroring

it in various ways, are the more mundane realities of heterosexist history of the Plains north of the border in Canada. Lyle Dick, "Heterohegemonic Discourse and Homosexual Acts: The Case of Saskatchewan in the Settlement Era" (paper presented to Sex and the State History Conference, Toronto, July 1985), has reported that after Canada acquired the Western Territory of Rupert's Land in 1870, in part to provide an agricultural hinterland, it placed Natives on reserves, disposed of lands to family farmers, and passed and then extended its laws designed "to reinforce traditional sexual mores, by providing stiffer penalties for non-familial, non-procreative sexual offences." Also on homosexuality in historic western Canada, see Terry L. Chapman, "'An Oscar Wilde Type': 'The Abominable Crime of Buggery' in Western Canada, 1890-1920," *Criminal Justice History* 4, no. 4 (1983): 97-118.

7. Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, (New York: Plume/Penguin, 1996). On changing homosexual identity, see John Boswell, "Revolutions, Universals, and Sexual Categories," David Halperin, "Sex Before Sexuality: Pederasty, Politics, and Power in Classical Athens," and Robert Padgug, "Sexual Matters: Rethinking Sexuality in History," all in Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey Jr., eds., *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: Meridian, 1990). For a survey of sexuality in the context of American historical change, see John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). Useful in understanding the varied ways Americans at the turn of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century conceived of heterosexual and homosexuals is George Chauncey Jr., "Christian Brotherhood or Sexual Perversion? Homosexual Identities and the Construction of Sexual Boundaries in the World War I Era," *Hidden from History*, and George Chauncey Jr., *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), pp. 12-23.

8. Horace Greeley, *An Overland Journey, from San Francisco, in the Summer of 1859* (New York: C. M. Saxton, Barker & Co., 1860), p. 85; Albert D. Richardson, *Beyond the Mississippi: Life and Adventure on the Prairies, Mountains, and Pacific Coast, 1857-1867* (Hartford, Conn.: American Publishing Company, 1867), p. 200. For other accounts of "passing" women, see, for example, The San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project, "'She Even Chewed Tobacco': A Pictorial Narrative of Passing Women in America," in *Hidden from History* (note 7 above), pp. 183-94; and *Gay American History* (note 7 above), pp. 209-79.

9. A good introduction to Willa Cather, her work, and her sexuality is Joan Acocella, "Cather and the Academy," *New Yorker*, 27 November 1995, 56-71. Other Cather literature that deals with the issue of lesbianism includes Phyllis C. Robinson, *Willa: The Life of Willa Cather* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983); Sharon O'Brien, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); James Woodress, "Cather and Her Friends," *Critical Essays on Willa Cather*, ed. John J. Murphy (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), pp. 81-95; Reginald Dyck, "The Feminist Critique of Willa Cather's Fiction: A Review Essay," *Women's Studies* 22, no. 3 (1993): 263-79; Judith Fetterley, "My *Antonia*, Jim Burden and the Dilemma of the Lesbian Writer," in *Gender Studies: New Directions in Feminist Criticism*, ed. Judith Spector (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1986), pp. 43-59; Jeane Harris, "A Code of Her Own: Attitudes toward Women in Willa Cather's Short Fiction," 36, no. 1 (spring 1990): 81-89; Deborah G. Lambert, "The Defeat of a Hero: Autonomy and Sexuality in My *Antonia*," *American Literature* 53, no. 4 (January 1982): 676-90; John H. Flannigan, "Issue of Gender and Lesbian Love: Goblins in the 'The Garden,'" *Cather Studies* 2 (1993): 23-40; Joseph Epstein, "Willa Cather: Listing toward Lesbos," *The New Criterion* 2, no. 4 (December 1983): 35-43.

10. For a lengthy discussion of William Cather, Jr., see O'Brien, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (note 9 above), pp. 96-116. O'Brien explains this episode in the novelist's life as part of Cather's psychic distancing and then ultimate reattachment to her mother—the central story that O'Brien proposes to explain Cather as a lesbian. This argument is part of the feminist attempt to recover Cather as their own. If one regards Cather as transgendered, one will have a great number of questions about O'Brien's analysis.

11. Smith, *Virgin Land* (note 5 above), p. 124; Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), 59.

12. Cather, *My Antonia*, pp. 24, 25, 30, 37, 40-41, 89, 97-98, 113, 135, 138, 186, 192-94. On Cather taking on the guise of her male characters, see Lambert, "The Defeat of a Hero" (note 9 above).

13. Badger Clark, *Sun and Saddle Leather*, 6th ed. (Boston: Gorham Press, 1922), p. 84; Manuel Boyfrank to Roger Austin, 16 December 1974, pp. 16, 17, 18, Manuel Boyfrank Papers, International Gay and Lesbian Archives, West Hollywood, Calif.; I wish to acknowledge Walter L. Williams for loaning me his notes on Boyfrank. Clifford P. Westermeier, "The Cowboy and Sex," in *The Cowboy: Six-Shooters, Songs, and Sex*, ed. Charles W.

Harris and Buck Rainey (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), pp. 85-105, offers a number of tawdry, traditional cowboy rhymes that have homosexual overtones.

14. Katz, *Gay American History* (note 1 above), pp. 50-51.

15. *Denver Tribune*, 16 November 1885, as quoted in Thomas Jacob Noel, "Gay Bars and the Emergence of the Denver Homosexual Community," *The Social Science Journal* 15, no. 2 (1978): 61.

16. Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders Company, 1948), pp. 455-59. For references to the influence of Kinsey's work, as I outlined briefly in this paragraph, see John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. 285-87, 291-92; Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: Plume, 1991), pp. 259-60; Katz, *Gay American History* (note 1 above), pp. 95, 96, 98; John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1890-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 33-37, 42-43. Five years after *Sexual Behavior of the Human Male* appeared, Kinsey released its companion volume, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. Its narrative considers specifically rural women in only a couple of sentences, just enough to report that active homosexual incidences "appear to have been a bit higher among the rural females in their teens, but they were higher among urban females after the age of twenty." Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, Clyde E. Martin, and Paul H. Gebhard, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1953), p. 463.

17. Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (note 16 above), p. 457.

18. My following discussion of Old Nash is drawn from Elizabeth B. Custer, *Boots and Saddles, Or Life*

in Dakota with General Custer (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1885), pp. 198-202 and from Don Rickey Jr., *Forty Miles a Day on Beans and Hay: The Enlisted Soldier Fighting the Indian Wars* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), pp. 170-71. I will use the affectionate name of "manny manny" for Old Nash's husband in uncapitalized form, as that is the way Custer reported it. For a good biography on Custer, but one that does not include a discussion of this episode, see Shirley A. Leckie, *Elizabeth Bacon Custer and the Making of a Myth* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993); see also Maryan Wherry, "Women and the Western Military Frontier: Elizabeth Bacon Custer," in *Nineteenth-Century Women Learn to Write*, ed. Catherine Hobbs (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995).

19. On homosexuality in the military and/or in the military in the West, see Thomas P. Lowry, M.D., *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell: Sex in the Civil War* (Mechanicsburg, Penn.: Stackpole Books, 1994), pp. 109-18; Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire* (note 16 above); Rickey, *Forty Miles a Day on Beans and Hay* (note 18 above), p. 171; and Terry Mangan, "The Gay West" (unpublished paper at the Colorado Historical Society, Denver), pp. 16-17. I am indebted to the late Terry Mangan's unpublished paper for the idea that Custer was unable to understand the possibility that love played a role in the suicide of Old Nash's husband.

20. The following story I am recreating from the *Lincoln County* (New Mexico Territory) *Leader*, 4 April 1891; reprinted in *Lincoln County Historical Society Newsletter*, August 1993, 3-5.

21. George A. Dorsey, *Traditions of the Caddo* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1905), p. 19.

22. D. Michael Quinn, *Same-Sex Dynamics among Nineteenth-Century Americans: A Mormon Example* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), pp. 281, 284, 317, 328.

23. Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh* (note 1 above), pp. 21, 41, 70-71, 84, 190, 199, 227-28.