


2016

Adopting a Third Gender in the United States

Anna K. Self
Cleveland State University

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: <http://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/tdr>

 Part of the [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Other Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Self, Anna K.. "Adopting a Third Gender in the United States." *The Downtown Review*. Vol. 3. Iss. 2 (2016).
Available at: <http://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/tdr/vol3/iss2/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Downtown Review by an authorized editor of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact library.es@csuohio.edu.

American society currently functions with a gender binary comprised of two options – male or female. It is my belief that the binary should be expanded and that our society should adopt a third gender. Adopting the third gender has been done in the past in cultures such as the Yoruba, the Inuit, and many other Native American tribes. These cultures could serve as a template for how to integrate the third gender into our current society, as people that identified as the third gender were respected and not considered a barrier to reproduction. Another aspect of Native American culture we should consider adopting is identifying intersexual individuals as our third gender because their unique perspective of not biologically matching either sex. This unique perspective provides a common experience that could be labeled as a third gender if allowed to grow socially.

The Third Gender in Past Societies

Inuit

Michael Mauss's research on the Inuit revealed that their culture contains "a third element" that straddles "the boundary" (d'Anglure, 2005, p. 134) between the male and female genders. The third element is a gender as opposed to a sex because the people within the third element can be classified as either biologically male or biologically female. The main reason a person identified as the third gender was to maintain a "task-driven familial demography or balance" (Trexler, 2002, p. 619) if there was an unbalanced sex ratio in the children of a family. The Inuit culture clearly separated male roles from female roles, and if there was an unbalanced

ratio between the children, the family needed balance in the societal roles and would change the child's gender to reflect the desired role. Another reason a person within the Inuit culture identified as the third gender was if the parent had a dream of their ancestor while the wife was pregnant. The child born after this dream would be given the ancestor's name and brought up in the gender of the ancestor (d'Anglure, 2005, p. 137). All three genders were treated equally because "the bearing of a son and the killing and cutting up of a whale" (d'Anglure, 2005, p. 138), the female role and male role respectively, were equally valued in Inuit culture since the emphasis was on having a skill rather than conforming to traditional gender roles.

Yoruba

Before Western explorers interacted with the Yoruba, "no gender system was in place" (Lugones, 2007, p. 196) and people were given tasks based on their characteristics rather than on their gender. The explorers were not expecting to find a society without a gender system and the "assumption that Yoruba society included gender as an organizing principle" (Lugones, 2007, p. 196) displays the emphasis on gender present in Western society. When Western explorers introduced their gender structure to the Yoruba, the Yoruba men were willing to help implement the Western system as it gave them more power over the Yoruba women. The women were unhappy in this development because they recognized that "women are those who do not have a penis; those who do not have power; those who cannot participate in the public arena" (Lugones, 2007, p. 197) in Western society. The destruction of the Yoruba's original societal structure was also detrimental to the relationships between parents and their children as removing the "Ìyá's pre-earthly and mystical roles" (Oyewumi, 2016, p. 66) destroyed the essence of their identity that the Western title of "father" could not replace.

I believe that Yoruba culture before Western intervention clearly demonstrates how a third gender could be properly developed in our current society. Prior to instituting a gender structure that gave weight to males over females, the Yoruba had no qualms over power related to gender. When everyone was recognized as equal participants in their society, everyone was free to choose how to act with no restriction from traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Thus, if we were to adopt a third gender, all genders must be treated equally with no limitations placed on what jobs and activities any gender can do in order to achieve true equality and inclusion in our society.

Native Americans

Many of the matriarchal Native American societies “recognized ‘third’ gendering and homosexuality positively” (Lugones, 2007, p. 196) because they defined gender in egalitarian terms. Since gender was defined in egalitarian terms, the tribe members chose their gender based on “proclivity, inclination, and temperament” (Lugones, 2007, p. 199). Their third gender was often referred to as “boté, burdash, and mujerados” (Balestrery, 2012, p. 644), but the gender categories themselves were flexible in that they resembled a spectrum more than three mutually-exclusive options. When European settlers interacted with the Native American tribes, they tried to assimilate the Native Americans to their way of life and ended up destroying the Native Americans’ “two-sided complementary social structure; the understanding of gender; and the economic distribution” (Lugones, 2007, p. 199) since it did not fit their European ideals. The understanding of gender, in particular, was destroyed because the Europeans defined gender in biological terms instead of egalitarian terms, which caused them to only recognize two valid genders – man and woman.

Religious Aspect

The Inuit culture of Alaska believed in a third gender that had a religious component to it. The third gender in the Inuit culture “has a mediatory function on the religious plane” (d’Anglure, 2005, p. 135) because the third gender was believed to have a deeper, more in-depth connection with the Maker of All. Thus, when a child was raised in the opposite gender, it often served as a “prelude to becoming a shaman” (d’Anglure, 2005, p. 138). Children who identified as the third gender were also prime candidates for becoming shamans because that identification allowed them to compensate for not participating in the sexual division of labor. While they were taught the skill of their chosen gender, it became more difficult to participate in their society because their skill did not match the normal structure of their society where men would hunt and women would sew.

While the religious aspect would not be added to a modern third gender, it is important to note that within Inuit society, members of the third gender were treated with respect and seen as equal contributors. Several myths within the Inuit culture elaborated on how people of the third gender were to be treated and detailed the consequences should they not be given respect. One myth stated that laughing at a person of the third gender “would bring a curse” (d’Anglure, 2005, p. 135) on them because of the perceived relationship depth between the Maker of All and the members of the third gender. Another myth went further and detailed how a man who attempted to kill a member of the third gender became a “victim of his own hatred” (d’Anglure, 2005, p. 140) as he was killed by the same method he used on the third-gender person. This suggests that if our society were to adopt a third gender, there would have to be social consequences to protect the third gender from people who continue to link gender and biology. While the consequences

should not be as extreme as death, it should become a societal norm for each gender to have the same social standing in society.

The presence of consequences is especially poignant when considering the Hijras, who are considered a third gender in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal. The Hijras developed as a religious community “devoted to the worship of the mother goddess Bahuchara Mata” (Dea, 2016, p. 76) but in modern times, the Hijras are associated with sex work. This association causes them to be “shunned and abused” (Dea, 2016, p. 78) because they contradict societal views on modesty and purity. It is important to note that Hijras often choose their role because of their “desire to occupy female gender roles” (Dea, 2016, p. 77) since they do not feel comfortable with male gender roles. This discomfort lends itself to the establishment and continuing existence of the Hijras despite the knowledge that the position comes with abuse.

Our society in the United States should learn from the Hijras’ precarious position in South Asian society, and strive to ensure a safer environment for citizens who may be feeling similar to the Hijras that take on the role just to be able to occupy female gender roles. No citizen should have to conform to a gender they do not feel comfortable with, nor should they have to experience abuse just for being the person they want to be. Because our society in the United States was founded on the beliefs of equality and justice for all, our third gender should be protected by the same laws and given the same rights as both established genders. By creating a third gender in the United States, we could help our fellow Americans feel more comfortable in our society and ensure that a nation exists where a third gender is given the rights of every other gender.

Reproduction Argument

A common argument heard today against expanding our definition of gender is that it will prevent reproduction as it will discourage the union between a man and a woman. Although this thought process is flawed in several ways (including the exclusion of homosexual couples), it must be addressed before a third gender could be nationally accepted. If our society bases our third gender on the third gender found within Inuit society, this argument could be resolved because the Inuit believed a “boy with female gender identity was the ideal companion for a girl with male gender-identity” (d’Anglure, 2005, p. 143). They believed this relationship to be ideal since the boy would have learned how to sew and the girl would have learned how to hunt, and therefore, the relationship would fulfill the sexual division of labor found in all Inuit relationships. The couple could reproduce as the boy and the girl had not changed their sex but merely their gender identities. If there was no member of the third gender with the opposite sex, the Inuit would revert the child to the gender traditionally associated with its sex at puberty (d’Anglure, 2005, p. 143) and teach the child the new set of skills. Thus, the child could reproduce and contribute to the household.

Intersexual Individuals

An alternative to the third gender is the category of intersexed individuals. The United States has historically “failed to recognize intersexuals” (Lugones, 2007, p. 194) even though “1 to 4 percent of the world’s population is intersexed” (Lugones, 2007, p. 194) and do not fall neatly into the gender binary system our society has created. Instead of allowing children with micro-penises or enlarged clitorises to live as neither man nor woman, our society “frequently surgically and hormonally turned” (Lugones, 2007, p. 195) intersexed individuals into males or females and thus imposed the gender our society associates with that sex. I believe that our

society should follow the precedent set by the Native Americans because intersexed individuals were acknowledged “without assimilation to the sexual binary” (Lugones, 2007, p. 195) and given an equal standing in society. Allowing children with micro-penises and/or enlarged clitorises to develop with a male sex and with a female sex, respectively, may create a third gender organically as they navigate the world in a way that our society has never explored before. It may be possible that they will develop and identify with the gender our society associates with their sex. However, the possibility that they will not identify with either gender should be addressed by allowing them the flexibility to reject both genders and create a new, third gender.

Current Gender System

The structure of our society may prevent the development of a third gender if the structure is not altered. Our current society re-enforces the two-gender system as early as the birth of an infant because society associates certain names with certain genders. Because “Inuit personal names have no gender association” (d’Anglure, 2005, p. 137), the Inuit do not encounter this problem and have no issue with implementing a three-gender society. I believe that the trend in our current society of giving children unique names could contribute to the necessary shift of de-gendering names and allow our society to no longer assume a child’s gender based solely on the name the child’s parents gave them.

In addition, I believe that Maria Lugones’ opinion that “gender arrangements need not be either heterosexual or patriarchal” (2007, p. 190) should be adopted as our society moves away from the heterosexual and patriarchal system of our past. Adopting the third gender requires that our society consider it to be the equal of the already established male and female genders or else no member of the society would feel entirely comfortable identifying as the third gender. The

patriarchal society ensures the male gender is dominant, but our society has been breaking down this system with such landmark events as women's right to vote and ensuring a decrease in discriminatory hiring practices. If these same rights could be applied to a third gender, then the patriarchal system could truly be broken in the United States and equality of genders could be achieved while also allowing people currently uncomfortable with their genders to break free and adopt a third gender. The United States has also moved past being a truly heterosexual-only nation by granting homosexual couples the right to marry. By granting homosexual couples the right to marry and the fact that relationships that include a person that identifies as the third gender do not necessary have to occur between people of different sexes would allow people in a third gender to freely engage in monogamous relationships because there is no legitimate reason to deny third gender rights given to both established genders.

Conclusion

The United States should revise the gender binary system currently in place by adding a third gender. This third gender can either be developed naturally by allowing intersexed individuals to develop without interference, or it can be developed by allowing individuals to make their own decisions regarding their gender without societal interference – such as the behavior of others toward a gender specific name. Either would be appropriate because it could prevent individuals from feeling uncomfortable with themselves and allow them to express themselves in a way they feel appropriate. Past societies that included a third gender can act as a guide to how the United States incorporates its own third gender, but it should be noted that past societies will not provide an exact template as our societies differ in many ways beyond our gender system.

References

- Balestrery, J. E. (2012). "Intersecting discourses on race and sexuality: compounded colonization among LGBTTTQ American Indians/Alaska Natives." *Journal of Homosexuality*, 59(5), 633-655.
- D'Anglure, B. S. (2005). "The third gender of the Inuit." *Diogenes*, 52(208), 134-144.
- Dea, S. (2016). *Beyond the binary: Thinking about sex and gender*. Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press.
- Lugones, M. (2007). "Heterosexualism and the colonial/modern gender system." *Hypatia*, 22(1), 186-209.
- Oyewumi, O. (2016). *What gender is motherhood?: Changing Yoruba ideas of power, procreation, and identity in the age of modernity*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Trexler, R. C. (2002). "Making the American berdache: choice or constraint?" *Journal of Social History* 35(3), 613-636.