Introduction

Fay A. Yarbrough

One cannot hark back to a time when gender roles were clear and simple or definitions of marriage were universally agreed upon. Gender roles and sexual identities have never been static, but rather constantly shift in relation to historical change and contact between groups. Questions about how societies choose to define gender identities, the meaning of sexual orientation and behavior, and what constitutes marriage continue to provoke controversy even now. This essay collection explores some of this variation in the meanings of gender, sexuality, and marriage by examining indigenous communities in North America from the colonial period through the nineteenth century. While the essays in the collection do not directly tackle current controversies, they do offer important historical background suggesting perhaps the roots of contemporary controversies and ways to address them.

Several overarching themes connect the essays in Gender and Sexuality in Indigenous North America, 1400–1850. The question of how Europeans manipulated native ideas about gender for their own purposes and how indigenous people responded to European attempts to impose gendered cultural practices that clashed with native thinking informs all of the work here. For instance Sandra Slater finds that conflicting definitions of masculinity could lead to violence between indigenous groups and Europeans. Conversely Dawn G. Marsh shows that Quakers’ own acceptance of more egalitarian gender roles, a pattern more in line with local native groups, enabled Lenape woman Hannah Freeman to negotiate her own economic activity and land ownership with her Quaker neighbors. Likewise M. Carmen Gomez-Galisteo describes Spanish explorer Cabeza de Vaca taking on some of the roles of native women in order to improve his situation while a captive of the local indigenous population. Both Jan V. Noel and Fay A. Yarbrough demonstrate the various ways in which indigenous peoples could react to European and Euro-American pressure to change women’s roles in particular in native societies. Moreover, Europeans often spoke of the act of conquest itself in gendered terms, as discussed by Slater and Gomez-Galisteo.

Many of the essays also address how indigenous people made meaning of gender and how these meanings changed over time within their own communities.
Noel describes Iroquois women’s position before European contact as quite powerful and integral to the social, economic, and political life of the Iroquois people. Marsh and Yarbrough also show that some elements of native women’s authority endured despite, and sometimes because of, contact with colonists and Americans. Roger M. Carpenter’s essay demonstrates the variety of possible gender roles among some indigenous groups in his description of the two-spirit phenomenon, a topic also dealt with in varying degrees by Gomez-Galisteo, Slater, and Gabriel S. Estrada.

Several authors consider sexual practice as a site for cultural articulation, as well as a vehicle for the expression of gender roles. Estrada, for instance, contends that many contemporary writers employ indigenous sexual and gender histories in describing their own contemporary racial, ethnic, and sexual identities, connecting sixteenth-century indigenous sexual practice and behavior to modern Chicano/a and Mestizo/a authors and identities. Estrada’s work forms a provocative conversation with Gomez-Galisteo, Slater, and Carpenter about the roles, function, and perception of two-spirited individuals in native societies, a conversation that addresses questions such as the ability of such individuals to marry or participate in warfare and ceremonial life, and choice and consent in taking on this role. Conversely Gomez-Galisteo also notes the surprising absence of sexual activity between native women and European men in Cabeza de Vaca’s narrative, an omission that runs counter to many other accounts by Cabeza de Vaca’s contemporaries and that may have had political implications of its own.

Finally, race is an important lens through which many of the authors here examine native history, and thus race is another theme linking the essays in this collection. Often Europeans and colonists viewed native practices, be they related to gender, sexual activity, religion, and so forth, as suspect precisely because the practitioners were a racialized “other” group. That is, allegedly promiscuous native women described by Gomez-Galisteo, or so-called deviant sexual behavior discussed by Carpenter or Estrada, or barbarous practices in warfare presented by Slater and Carpenter merely served as evidence of how different native people were from European observers. Thus Salvador de los Santos Ramirez, according to Dorothy Tanck de Estrada, became the subject of religious interest because she was an Otomi Indian and yet behaved in such a pious manner in spite of that identity, exceeding even many European women in the colony in virtuous comportment. And sometimes natives began to formulate their own ideas about race, as Yarbrough’s discussion of resistance and accommodation to American gender roles among the Choctaw Indians demonstrates.

*Gender and Sexuality in Indigenous North America, 1400–1850*, bridges geographical divides with essays that focus on indigenous peoples in locations ranging
from Canada, the expanse of the continental United States, and Mexico. Often the contemporary boundaries separating these places are artificial and obscure the fluidity of the societies that historically occupied these spaces. And indigenous communities across these geographical territories sometimes shared similar experiences with colonialism and conquest. Scholarship on the borderlands, such as James F. Brooks's *Captives and Cousins*, demonstrates that the people living in these spaces often did not recognize the legal borders that separated them. And other essay collections, such as Tiya Miles and Sharon P. Holland's *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds*, which explores indigenous interactions with people of African descent from New England to the Indian Territory, also confirm the value of looking beyond traditional regional boundaries.1

Authors had been producing materials considering native populations for quite some time, as early as the eighteenth century, before the recent turn by scholars to discussions of this aspect, gender and sexuality, of the meeting of indigenous peoples and Europeans.2 In the interim of the nineteenth century, other writers provided useful histories of various native groups or events.3 By the twentieth century native groups had become the focus of intense study for anthropologists.4 At the same time figures such as Grant Foreman and Angie Debo were producing comprehensive histories of various North American indigenous groups while Annie Heloise Abel wrote detailed studies of American Indians confronting the American Civil War.5 In the latter twentieth century the larger field of American Indian Studies grew, in part, out of the agitation of American Indian students who participated in the activist movements of the Civil Rights Era. Such agitation led to the growth of Native American Studies departments and programs at American universities and to a proliferation in the production of histories of native peoples. Scholars attempted to illuminate native life and reveal native perspectives on interactions with Europeans and later Americans. These students and scholars demonstrated that Indians had not, in fact, “vanished,” and that a process sometimes seen as the conquest and absorption of native groups by European forces was far more complex and contested.6 And both “natives and newcomers,” to borrow James Axtell's phrase, changed in these interactions.7

Newer scholarship increasingly placed natives and their agency at the center of the narrative.8 Academic histories of natives no longer began and ended with European contact. Instead, anthropologists, archaeologists, and historians plumbed new sources or considered more familiar sources in new ways to describe varied and complex native societies with mature systems of governance that sometimes came into conflict long before the arrival of Europeans.9 Some indigenous societies established extensive networks of trade and built cities.10 And some native groups practiced a form of slavery, enslaving indigenous enemies and then,
later, people of African descent. Scholars depicted native peoples not as objects of study but as historical subjects, acting and reacting to circumstances and making choices.

The field of American Indian history continues to be vibrant, as scholars ask questions that complicate notions of resistance and the meaning of cultural continuity. Subjects of recent scholarship include the concept of native agency, native pursuits of nationalism and national identities, relationships between indigenous peoples and people of African descent, the fight for sovereignty in indigenous communities, and the environmental consequences of federal policies for American Indians. Moreover, many native groups grapple with the meaning of Indian identity writ large in the United States given the role of the federal government and the states in recognizing various Indian nations and within a larger global context that includes indigenous peoples such as the Maori of New Zealand or the Aborigines of Australia.

This collection of essays captures the growing scholarly interest in the operation of notions of gender and sexuality in native societies throughout the colonial Americas and through the Civil War era. Scholars posit questions such as, how did gender roles for men and women in native societies change over time and in relation to contact with Europeans? What ideas about gender remained constant for particular indigenous communities and why? What was the role of native people who occupied seemingly incongruous places within gender paradigms? The scholars’ answers to these questions reveal something of the meaning of gender in native societies and for the Europeans who encountered them.

Organized chronologically, this collection begins with M. Carmen Gomez-Galisteo’s essay about the malleability of notions of gender among indigenous groups and how outsiders could negotiate those ideas as a strategy for survival. While in Spanish Florida, conquistador Cabeza de Vaca found himself in the unlikely position of performing the duties of a native woman as a trader and a healer in order to avoid the fate of many adult male captives, namely death. Performing these duties also afforded Cabeza de Vaca freedom of movement and more status than that of a slave. Rather than reject these roles because they were too feminine, Cabeza de Vaca embraced them and wrote about them, not surprisingly, in a favorable light. Gomez-Galisteo also explores the gendered language used by the conquistadors to describe the act of conquest and the physical land, as well as the indigenous people they encountered. While many other explorers portrayed native women as monstrous and sexually aberrant in their promiscuity, Cabeza de Vaca depicted native women as mothers and claimed to have been sexually chaste during his New World travels, a claim that Gomez-Galisteo questions.

Like Gomez-Galisteo, Sandra Slater addresses the meanings of masculinity as they were negotiated by European explorers and natives in the early years of
contact and what happened when those ideas sometimes collided. Slater posits that both native and European men built their masculine identities on several broad concepts: honor, their relationships to and with women, warfare, and sexual practice. European and native men might deem each other more or less manly based on how each group treated women, behaved in battle, or permitted or punished certain kinds of sexual behavior. Moreover, in another point of tangency with Gomez-Galisteo, Slater finds that the entire endeavor of exploration had gendered connotations in European minds who described it in terms of the male explorers displaying manly courage as they conquered the feminized “virgin” land. And explorers sometimes extended this metaphor to the inhabitants of the land. Thus, by conquering the land, European explorers imagined they had also conquered, and therefore had access to, native women. Slater’s essay underscores the importance of masculinity in constructions and negotiations of identity in the New World.

In a more synthetic exploration of gender roles within a specific native group, Jan V. Noel provides a clear and thoughtful consideration of the existing literature about gender among the Haudenosaunee (also known as the Iroquois) and argues persuasively that the Haudenosaunee were not patriarchal. To the contrary, “the Haudenosaunee, at least as late as the eighteenth century, saw male and female roles in terms of reciprocal relationships that did not require power struggles.” While this description of gender relationships is hard for many modern observers to accept, Noel finds that women nonetheless performed important functions in Haudenosaunee society by choosing leaders, by determining the fate of war captives, by adjudicating land disputes, by farming the land, and by participating in council meetings. Contact with Europeans, of course, affected the relations between the sexes in Iroquoia, but Noel finds that “there is considerable evidence to suggest that many mature Iroquois women maintained unusual positions even after two or three centuries of interaction with Europeans.” Noel contends the Haudenosaunee offer a glimpse of the contours and possibilities of an egalitarian society.

Dorothy Tanck de Estrada and Dawn Marsh consider the lives of individual women and what their experiences can reveal about the larger societies from which these women emerged. Tanck de Estrada describes the life of one remarkable native woman in eighteenth-century New Spain who was regarded by many of her contemporaries as a saint. Salvadora de los Santos Ramirez’s rise to religious importance was all the more surprising because of her status as an Otomi Indian, “judged by many,” in Tanck de Estrada’s words, “to be the most backwards and uncouth people in the region.” Perhaps even more unusual, shortly after her death Father Antonio de Paredes, a prominent Jesuit priest, published her biography in the form of an edifying letter, a form usually reserved for “recently deceased
priest[s], novice[s], or brother[s] who were thought to be exceptionally holy.” Thus, while the sisters in the beaterio where de los Santos Ramirez lived and worked did not appear to hold her in high regard, for reasons of class according to Tanck de Estrada, the denizens of the city of Querétaro and at least one important member of the church hierarchy did. Through de los Santos Ramirez’s life, Tanck de Estrada is able to illuminate gendered and cultural expectations about women in colonial Mexico.

Just as Tanck de Estrada is able to access the life of a humble Otomi Indian woman through the writings of a male contemporary, Marsh is able to recreate the life of Hannah Freeman because a man, Moses Marshall, recorded the details. In this case Marshall collected testimony about Freeman’s life for administrative purposes to determine her county of residence and eligibility for the services of the poorhouse. Hannah Freeman’s life serves as a window on native/colonial interactions in the eighteenth-century Pennsylvania colony. Marsh finds that those relationships were often negotiated, and natives maintained a surprising amount of control over ancestral lands. Freeman, a Lenape Indian, was a part of a mobile woman-centered family unit that followed the demand for labor in the Brandywine River Valley and fled this territory in the face of the brutality of the Paxton Boys, who massacred Conestoga Indians in 1763. Upon the family’s return from exile, Freeman continued to work as a basket maker, healer, seamstress, and servant for both black and white residents of the valley. Marsh posits that Freeman, like her counterparts elsewhere, constantly strategized to preserve her connections to her traditional territories, and that white people sometimes accommodated indigenous peoples in these claims even when not bound by law to do so.

Fay A. Yarbrough exchanges the microhistorical approach of several of the essays for a broader consideration of women’s roles in Choctaw society during the nineteenth century and how those roles changed during this tumultuous time, a century that included the removal of the Choctaw Indians from the southeastern United States to Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma and their alliance with the Confederacy during the Civil War. She begins with a discussion of matrilineally determined clans and matrilocal households and their importance to Choctaw social organization. Choctaw women also traditionally derived power from their work as agriculturalists, producing the corn that was so important to sustenance and ceremonial life among the Choctaws. Over the course of the nineteenth century, however, slaves of African descent, native men, and white men would encroach on Choctaw women’s role as agriculturalists. And as Choctaws turned to more formalized systems of governance in the form of a written constitution and laws, Choctaw women found some of their traditional authority eroding and their marital choices under increased scrutiny.
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While the three preceding articles focus on native women and men in more familiar gendered roles, Roger M. Carpenter turns his attention to another gendered group that many, especially Europeans, found unfathomable. Carpenter sheds important light on the role of male and female two-spirits in indigenous society, particularly in warfare, and how they were perceived by native peoples and Europeans. Carpenter also offers some discussion of the origins and meaning of the controversial term *berdache*. Found throughout much of Native North America during the early contact period, two-spirit people provoked reactions from European (and later American) explorers and missionaries ranging from amusement to disgust to outright bafflement. Native groups appear to have accepted two-spirit individuals of both sexes as participants in warfare, a conclusion buttressed by Slater’s assertion that two-spirit individuals often performed important functions in battle as handlers of the bodies of dead warriors. Thus, while the European colonists and their descendants found two-spirit individuals particularly disturbing, native populations appeared to have a place for more than two gender identities within their gender universe.

Finally, Gabriel S. Estrada’s deeply personal essay is part historiography and part provocative consideration of how writers’ conclusions about indigenous sexual and gender histories are often shaped by their own racial, ethnic, and sexual identities. Like Carpenter, Estrada discusses the contentious term *berdache* and also the origins of the term *two-spirit* and why he prefers it. Moreover Estrada suggests that sixteenth-century indigenous sexual practice and behavior continue to influence how modern Chicano/a and Mestizo/a authors see themselves. Many authors find power in invoking an indigenous past or ancestry, but Estrada argues that to do so without paying careful attention to the actual histories of the people one invokes or to the historical accuracy of the invocation is problematic. Thus, for instance, different authors can examine indigenous histories of two-spirit peoples and find degradation and oppression or celebration and adulation or invisibility.

In the end we hope this collection of essays offers a preview of some of the newest scholarship in the field of native history. Trained in different disciplines in various countries, the contributors here work in several languages, apply varied methodologies, and use different sources, so the essays also serve as a lens through which to consider scholarly inquiry. Moreover, the issues the authors discuss—gender, sexuality, and identity—have continued resonance in native communities today, as well as within the larger societies of which those native communities form a part.

Notes

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2. James Adair, The History of the American Indians, ed. Kathryn E. Holland Braund (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005). This text was originally published in London in 1774. Of course there are older accounts that include information about native life that were often produced by missionaries or other religious figures. See, for instance, Bartolomé de las Casas’ History of the Indies (New York: Harper and Row, 1971) or his Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies (New York: Penguin, 1999), originally published in the sixteenth century.


14. The Lumbee Indians of North Carolina are just one of many groups that highlight the tensions between state and federal recognition of native groups. See Karen I. Blu, *The Lumbee Problem: The Making of an American Indian People* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980). For some discussion of identity for the Aborigines of Australia, see Elizabeth A.
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