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Unpacking An Imposed

The Colonial Binary, Hijras, and the Queering of India

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Ma, para su amor y leche de chocolate. Su cariño niño...

Sincerely,
Eric B. Cortes-Kopp

Introduction

On April 15, 2014, the Supreme Court of India ruled that hijras were legally a third gender. Justice K.S. Radhakrishnan said, “Transgender are citizens of this country... and recognition as a third gender is not a social or medical issue but a human rights issue.”¹ Hijras were well-respected prior to colonization, but now face high levels of discrimination and violence. According to Ina Goel and K.R. Nayar, hijras are viewed as “mere disease-causing organisms that are only remembered when it is time for a mandatory blood test or condom distribution through the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) running donor-centric and heavily-funded targeted intervention (TI) programmes.”²

Hijras live in intentional communities and, according to Ina Goel, “requires adoption by a hijra guru which often also includes payment of membership fee to enroll oneself in a particular gharana (method school) to which the guru belongs with specific community norms and tradition.”³ There are hierarchies within the community that also divide along *akwa* (non-castrated) and *nirvana* (non-castrated).⁴ Its important to note that hijras have different sexual orientations and gender identities, but “their trans role is often based on their assumed sexual positions, predominantly defined as ‘active’ and ‘passive.’”⁵ Therefore, hijras are impossible to place in the Western binary.

¹ Julie McCarthy, “In India, Landmark Ruling Recognizes Transgender Citizens,” *NPR* (April 15, 2014), <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/04/15/303408581/in-india-landmark-ruling-recognizes-transgender-citizens>.

² Ina Goel and K.R. Nayar, “Trajectories of the Transgender: Need to Move from Sex to Sexuality,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no. 47/48 (Dec. 1, 2012), 2.

³ Ina Goel, “Beyond the Gender Binary,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 49, no. 15 (April 12, 2014), 77.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

Most scholarship concerning hijras and other queer groups in India are limited to the late 1990s and early 2000s. Originally, my project sought to rely on primary source materials mainly from the National Archive located in New Delhi. I requested that some key documents be digitized prior to the second Indian lockdown early in the summer. Therefore, my project became more of an historiographical project, relying on two main monographs, several scholarly articles, and interviews with leading scholars of hijras. Three main sections comprise this work: précis of the two main monographs that have been published to date on hijras, a sketch of my own theory of regime construction of gender and sexual in India that is derived from my broader reading in the field this summer, and a series of academic interviews I completed with experts of South Asia, gender & sexuality, family, and imperialism.

Précis

JESSICA HINCHY. *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c.1850-1900*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Jessica Hinchy's *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: the Hijra, c. 1850-1900* examines hijra life and identity in relation to British regime-making in the North-Western Provinces and Punjab. In the eyes of the British, Hijra's mere existence challenged "gender expression, sexual behaviours, domestic arrangements and intimate relationships" that were the foundation of colonial rule and an emergent British imperial identity.⁶ The regime's solution to the 'hijra problem' was to seek the group's extinction through legal and policing methods, the most important being Part II of the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871.⁷ Other queered groups—khwajasarai, sakhis, zanas, etc—were caught in the crossfire, creating a new *Hijra*/eunuch category that was "often confused and porous."⁸ Hinchy primarily works with colonial documents located at the British Library, National Archives of India in New Delhi, and Uttar Pradesh State Archives in Allahabad and Lucknow to trace the administrative endeavors that produced eunuchs and aimed ultimately at their extinction.

Hinchey'sThe monograph is divided into three sections:. Part I, the more typical historical work, focuses on British attempts to solve the 'Eunuch Problem.' It is divided into Chapter 1, which uncovers a series of four hijra panics in northern India, due to high-level colonial officials' anxiety regarding "inadequate intelligence and incomplete archived

⁶ Jessica Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: the Hijra, c.1850-19000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2019), 3.

⁷ Hinchy, 3 &10.

⁸ Hinchy, 24.

knowledge” of the hijra community.⁹ Here Hinchy examines several court cases, including *Government v. Munsa* that demonstrates official colonial anxiety, and, Chapter 2, which examines how British officials viewed hijras as an ‘ungovernable population’ with no chance of redemption due to their gender expression, sexuality, mobility, and criminality towards children. Hinchy argues that the ‘eunuch problem’ was a multifaceted dilemma that was “interconnected with various other problems of governance” which fueled colonial anxiety.”¹⁰ Hijras existed outside the clear colonial sexual order based on a “clear demarcation between the public and private spheres” and “should not be visible in public space.”¹¹ Chapter 3 examines how the Indian middle class established its sense of superior morality in which the notion of respectability “defined their identity in relation to other social groups and older elite.”¹² Middle-class Indians conflated terms of slavery and guru-chela hierarchies when discussing the larger hijra community, but the middle-class’ main concern was policing courtesan performers and women’s sexuality at-large.¹³ Hinchy argues that while Indian men appropriated “colonial concepts of public space” to enforce indigenous morales, colonial beliefs concerning gender and sexuality were not uniformly practiced by indigenous peoples.¹⁴ Chapter 4 links together contradictory British interpretations of hijra impotence and oversexual nature, and efforts to provide for registers of all eunuchs within the North West Provinces and Punjab.¹⁵ Central to these notions was natural selection: hijras would die out because their status in society was morally irredeemable.

⁹ Hinchy, 27.

¹⁰ Hinchy, 79.

¹¹ Hinchy, 50.

¹² Hinchy, 80 & 83.

¹³ Hinchy, 85 & 81.

¹⁴ Hinchy, 89.

¹⁵ Hinchy, 107.

Part II examines hijra identity within the colonial archive. Hinchy employs Anne Stoler's 'reading against the grain' to find how archival documents and silences can be used to counter colonial narratives. Chapter 5 explores local methods of completing eunuch registers and the multivocal nature of the archive. Hinchy argues that colonial knowledge regarding hijras were "fractured" and "fissured" within different levels of the colonial regime.¹⁶ In Chapter 6, Hinchy uses the aforementioned registers to glean insight into hijra lives under the colonial regime. Contrary to some notions of high-level British officials, hijras were also engaged in agricultural and trading, often creating self-sustaining communities based on discipleship links.¹⁷ Hinchy's analysis does become disjointed at some points. As Ishita Pande, a professor at Queen's University asserts, "The move from a critical reflection on the colonial archive to an unreflexive use of those archives to retrieve marginal lives is somewhat incompatible."¹⁸ Hinchy is unable to fulfill her original goal of demonstrating the breadth of hijra life and involvement during the late 1800s.

Hinchy builds off previous scholarship on gender and sexuality in India undertaken by Indrani Chatterjee (on sexuality, slavery, and familial ties) and Philippa Levine (venereal disease, sex work, masculinity and femininity). Hinchy's well-researched work represents a breakthrough in the field of South Asian history. While various contemporary ethnographies exist, *Governing Gender and Sexuality* is the first historical foray into the colonial reconfiguration of the hijra community. That being said, Hinchy could have made a stronger intervention in regards to gender and sexuality methodology in the Indian subcontinent. In her review of *Governing*

¹⁶ Hinchy 135.

¹⁷ Hinchy, 143-150.

¹⁸ Ishita Pande, "Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: *The Hijra c.1850-1900* by Jessica Hinchy (review)," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 29 no. 3 (2020), 457.

Gender and Sexuality, Ishita Pande asserts, “Questions concerning sexuality and the archives, the portability or transslatability of sex (whether as a biological traits or as a category of analysis, the medicolegal and literary-cultural registers for constructing sexual knowledge, and race/caste as providing a template for sexual knowledge lie below the surface.”¹⁹ Although Hinchy does not make this specific intervention, questions of gender and sexuality should be examined in indigenous or periodic terms in order to not reflect the current back on the past as some scholars advocate for.²⁰

¹⁹ Pande, 458.

²⁰ See Kevin Ng, “Review Essay: Criminality, Sexuality, and Gender in British India Special Focus: Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c. 1850-1900,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 43:5, 1016-1017.

GAYATRI REDDY. *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*. Chicago, U.S.: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India by Gayatri Reddy is an Hyderabad-based ethnography on hijra identity. Despite the Indian state focusing on hijras, Reddy examines hijra formulation of self within a larger pan-koti identification. Koti is a pan-identity that includes indigenous expressions of gender and sexuality outside the woman/man binary. This includes hijras and different groups such as zenana (people who dress as women for performance, have extended kin networks, but do not live together), kada-catla kotis (people identified as male at birth who have families and wives, but also perform ‘hijranness’ and perform often at night), jogins, and siva satis.²¹ Reddy argues that to “solely view hijras within the framework of sex/gender difference”, a.k.a. ‘neither man nor women, is a “disservice to the complexity of their lives and their embeddedness within the social fabric of India.”²² Reddy divides the book into ten chapters—including an introduction and conclusion—that dissects different aspects of hijra identity including syncretic religious expression, kinship and familial bond, production of gender, system of honor, etc. Reddy primarily relies on interviews with *chelas* (younger hijras) as they offered unfiltered information than *gurus* (hijra leaders). Reddy occasionally makes use of archival materials to ground her research and ethnographic claims in an historical context.

Reddy’s work represents a significant contribution to not only gender and sexuality studies, but also to identity studies. Reddy circumvents previous scholarly interventions focused on hijra sexuality. Martyn Rogers, argues that hijras “conceive of personhood as operating across

²¹ Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South Asia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 16-20.

²² Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 4.

and within multiple subject positions constituted by the criss-crossing of gender, kinship, class, and religion.”²³ A key focus for Reddy is *izzat* (which she translates to respect) which serves as the local moral economy and foundation of Hijra construction of self and identity.²⁴ *Himmat*—the courage of strength to commit to abstinence—reveals an individual hijra’s authenticity and higher *izzat*.²⁵ Therefore, “hijras gain *izzat* through constructing their individuality as renouncers, and the medium or currency through which they construct their individuality is *izzat*.”²⁶ Reddy’s focus on the hijra’s affiliation with Islam, identification on Hindu mythology, religious figures, and their position of thirdness within Indian society. Yet this thirdness, as Reddy asserts, inherently involves competition between different koti groups, she challenges readers to question who decides what is thirdness.²⁷

Reddy bases her analysis upon different identity categories to argue that hijra identity is constituted by more than sexuality and gender when constituting thirdness. Chapter one examines *izzat*, but also delves into the colonial “(mis)representation” of hijras and eunuchs in their quest to “feminize” and control Indian society.²⁸ The contemporary societal pressure placed on hijra communities forces *gurus* to emphasize that hijras do not “have [any] mental or physical desire for [sex with] men,” there are internal distinctions between hijras that engaged in sex work and those who do not.²⁹ Chapter 3 examines the greater koti community and demonstrates the internal hierarchies in which hijras, zanas, and kada-catla kotis interact. Hijras are the most strikingly visible dimension of koti identity and therefore recognizable to the state. But other koti

²³ Martyn Rogers, “With Respect to Sex: Neogiating Hijra Identity in South India by Gayatri Reddy,” *The Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute* (2007) 13, no. 1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4622930>, 244.

²⁴ Reddy, 17; *Izzat* is also commonly translated as honor.

²⁵ Reddy, 40.

²⁶ Reddy, 40.

²⁷ Reddy, 40.

²⁸ Reddy, 25 & 29.

²⁹ Reddy, 39.

identifications commonly interact with and are often considered part of the hijra community. Zanas, for example, often have rit (have membership and respect hijra traditions) with certain hijra houses.³⁰ In Chapter 4, Reddy argues that hijra identity has a very Hindu “corporeal nature” that focuses on the “idealization” of “asexuality.”³¹ The nirvan operation—a hijra castration ceremony—while a symbol of spiritual authenticity and Hindu sexual renunciation is the exact moment in which hijras become stigmatized in “the eyes of the mainstream public.”³²

Reddy’s ethnography remains a foundational work in the field of Indian gender and sexuality studies. Her work represents the first successful attempt to examine all parts of Hijra identity. Previous work had solely focused on gender or sexuality, Reddy is able to cohesively bring all aspects of identity together. Reddy further argues that previous scholarship falls victim to the researcher’s own bias and preinterpreted notions of Western gender and sexuality. These scholars reflect sexual terms on the groups and people that they are writing about. This prevents them from truly understanding how hijras view themselves and how they operate within society at-large. Yet, she incorrectly applies the term asexual to hijra identity even though they never identify themselves as such. Her description of hijras as asexual undercuts the formulation of identity that she looks to establish. Also, Reddy fails to write about how patriarchal “regimes of power” regulate social spaces and other axes of hijra identity.³³

³⁰ Reddy, 53.

³¹ Reddy, 78-79.

³² Reddy, 96.

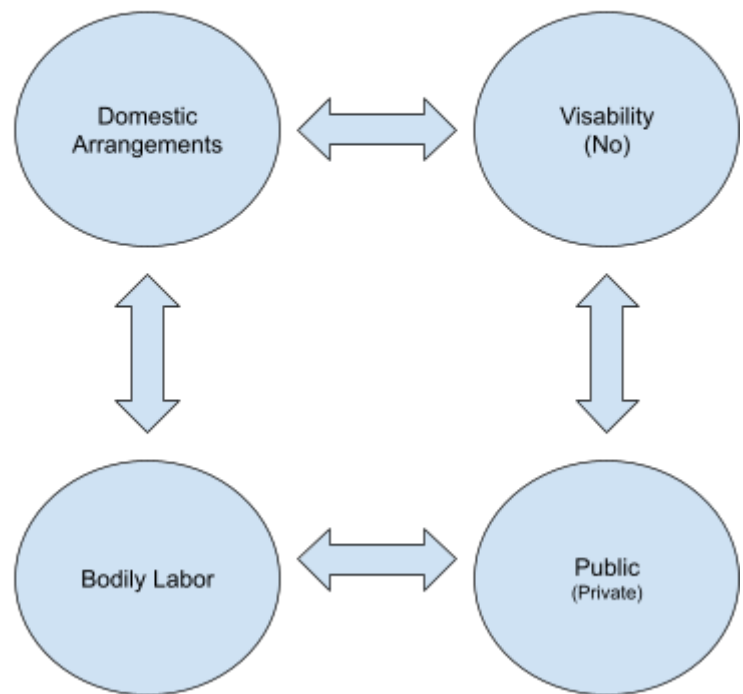
³³ Rogers, “With Respect to Sex: Neogitating Hijra Identity in South India by Gayatri Reddy,” 244.

Theory

Jessica Hinchey lays out the primary goal of the British colonial regime in regards to the Hijra: total extinction.³⁴ The British sought to regulate the following categories to aid the extinction of hijras: of domestic arrangements, visibility, Bodily Labor, and Public (Private). This process was not constant nor eternal, but reproduced the same discipling effect. Later on I will go into more detail regarding how this process morphed during the Nationalist and Postcolonial periods.

The colonial process of gender making was cyclical. Each area interacted with and subsequently influenced the other and so on and so forth. First, I will discuss the notions of **Public (Private) Sphere**. The notion of a separate private and public sphere existed and was articulated through Western traditions.³⁵ The British had a concern regarding how individuals presented themselves and acted in public.³⁶ The colonial regime

Colonial Process of Gender Making



³⁴ Hinchey, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India*, 14.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 89.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 108.

believed that the public could be regulated, to attend to the health of society at-large and reform individuals when not visible to the state, but that private calm modeling the public would eventually dissipate.

Visibility is very interconnected with the Public Sphere. The British viewed hijra expression, dress, and “obscene” nature as a mark of greater crimes (i.e. sodomizing) and moral impurity that existed throughout subcontinental societies. While very interconnected, both concepts are not the same. The British sought to discipline hijras and, as Michael Foucault posits about the Panopticon, induced a “state of conscious and permanent visibility that assure[d] the automatic functioning of power.”³⁷ Therefore, the British used visibility as a disciplinary method with the ultimate goal of influencing hijra behavior in private. Notions of public/private and inside/outside can shift with different regimes. Visibility refers to whether the regime uses hijra identity to form conceptions of their own identities and subgroups, therefore acknowledging some sort of legitimacy to hijras. Hinchy did not directly link this aspect within the frameworks of control.

Bodily Labor refers to how the regime endows certain gender identity with certain remunerative labor. For a colonial binary to ingrain itself in a population, it needs to ensure the compliance of almost every individual. Hijras, by the mere expression of their gender, stood as a challenge to the binary. The colonial regime therefore sought to declare hijra labor as outside of this realm or to ignore it completely when it did not fit into their narrative.³⁸ In redefining the hijra, the colonial state narrowed the recognized labor undertaken by hijras, making hijras less normative to society because their work was so particularized. Bandhai—the collection of alms

³⁷ Michael Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 201.

³⁸ Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India*, 94.

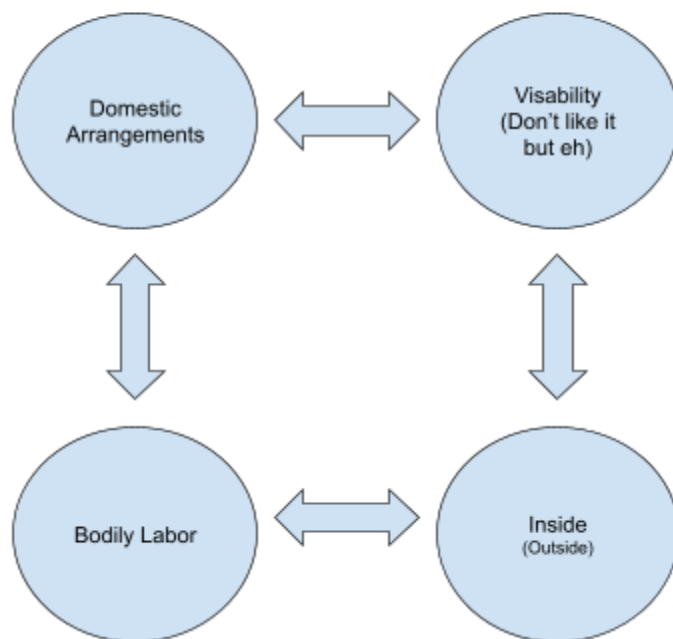
from blessing births, marriages, and other important events—has been a staple of hijra labor. Yet, they hijras are stereotypically associated as just entertainers and sex workers. Each regime has differing views if each occupation fits into the colonial binary. Thirdness, while acknowledged to be separate from gender normativity, still operates within a binary. A spectrum only has two ends. To decide where said labor fits in said spectrum is determined primarily by the state.

Domestic Arrangements are the foundation of any society. For the British and Western communities by the colonial period that involved the nuclear family. Familial kins in South Asia were intergenerational and extended.

Adoption and adoptive familial kin networks played a role in hijra and other queered groups on the subcontinent. The British regulated hijras by removing children from their households or preventing them from adopting (usually invoking typical narratives about hijras being predators towards children). The foundation of the colonial binary rested on the nuclear family. A

challenge to that structure brought the full wrath of the regime hurdling down (ex. Khwajasari being too powerful).³⁹

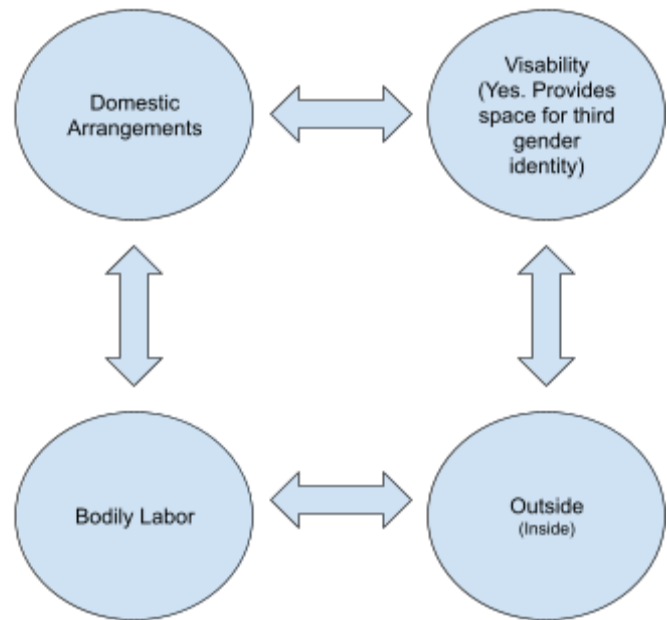
Nationalist Process of Gender Making



³⁹ Ibid, 23.

Within the nationalist construction of gender, the main shift was the construction of the Inside (Outside) spheres and Visibility. Unlike the British, most people residing on the subcontinent viewed the world as having more of a Inside/Outside divide. The inside “was ‘viewed as familiar, safe, [and] under the control of those involved’, the ‘outside’ contained strangers and was intrinsically disorderly.”⁴⁰ While the British maintained

Postcolonial Process of Gender Making



an astute control over the Outside (foreign affairs), Nationalists often focused on defining the Inside, their own familial structures. Hijra visibility, therefore, served as a reference point for middle-class Indians to base their own identities off of. While hijras were not recognized by the colonial state, their visibility within society was not as much of a nuisance for Indian society as it was for the British who believed indigenous people would spread venereal disease and sodomy.

A major transition to the status of hijras occurred in 2014 when the postcolonial Indian state recognized hijras as a third gender. With the spectre of British rule fading, the regime can focus on the Outside, like foreign policy matters. That being said, there is a further recognition of other society members that often were ‘strangers’ to the middle class. In this moment, with increased calls for LGBTQ+ rights, the state recognizes the further power, the postcolonial

⁴⁰ Ibid, 89.

Indian state could gain from including these members of society within “India.” For the first (and only time), hijra visibility is a positive in the eyes of a modern state. But the position of thirdness also marginalizes other indigenous genders that are not as openly visible within society, but exist outside the gender binary inherited from the colonial state. Because the regime does not only care about Visibility, it also enforces Bodily Labor and Domestic Arrangements. While this section mainly focuses on visibility and the public/private/inside/outside divide, they work to amplify gender expression. Therefore, multiple regimes attempted to control hijra labor and domestic arrangements by policing the group’s visibility in the public light.

Since colonial times, Hijras have remained on **the outside** of mainstream society which necessitates state policing of one kind or another. Hijra rights cannot be achieved in this postcolonial framework, which at first glance appears liberatory, as it relies upon practices of exclusion that have been inherited from the colonial state and its practices. While aspects of gender making have shifted over time, these most recent frameworks too marginalize hijras, placing them on the periphery of contemporary society. The hijra is mainly, as Foucault asserts, “seen, but [she] does not see; [she] is the object of information, never a subject in communication.”⁴¹ Power is not granted to hijras as individuals, but to the various officials in the state that oversee the “internal mechanism” of welfare, wealth redistribution, and healthcare.⁴² The “third gender” offered by the postcolonial state might be the most dangerous, because masquerading behind a liberatory human rights rhetoric the inclusion of thirdness reinscribes a gender binary that historically was responsible for the invisibility and extinction of a wide range of gender and sexual identities. It seeks to discipline, not to liberate.

⁴¹ Foucault, 200.

⁴² Ibid, 202.

Academic Interviews

Note: The interviews are listed in the order in which they were conducted. The notes from these interviews have been digitized and are available upon request.

Usman Hamid

Bio: Usman Hamid is a historian specializing in Islamic history in Central and South Asia, and the Mughal Empire.⁴³ He is currently an assistant professor of Asian Studies at Hamilton College. He has published articles on language circulation in early modern South Asia and royal concubines in Timurid Iran. He is currently writing about sexuality and the status of khwajasara within the Mughal period. His research has been supported by the Social Science and Humanities Council of Canada. Hamid received his B.A. and M.A. at McGill University, and Ph.D. at University of Toronto.

At the beginning of our discussion, Professor Hamid talked about the five gender identities present within Islam. The two most understandable to Western readers is male and female. Then there is male *khunta* and female *khunta*. *Khuntha* is an Islamic legal category in which a person's sex is not told. Male *khunthas*, for example, were sometimes identified as female at birth but identified as masc. There is also a *khuntha* category for those who did not identify with the four other genders. But from this discussion, gender has more expansive dimensions within Islamic tradition than that of the Western, mainly that of the individual and group. Gender identity in South Asia is somewhat more tied to forming relations to a similar community. Queer (and even cis-hetero) expressions of identity in West place the individual at the center of their community who then connect that identity to the community at-large.

⁴³ "Usman Hamid," Hamilton College Website, <https://www.hamilton.edu/academics/our-faculty/directory/faculty-detail/Usman-Hamid>.

Kinship was another part of the discussion. There was many forms of non-genetic kinship in the Mughal Empire. The British viewed these expressions of family through a queer lens: anything that did not fit within the nuclear family was to be othered. While adoption was present in Great Britain, it was not as common as the subcontinent. Hijras would often raise both genetically-related relatives and non-hijra community members. While colonial officials attempted to remove these children from households, I believe the colonial regime viewed hijra adopted-kin ties within themselves as a power structure that could challenge the British regime.⁴⁴

The conversation then shifted to a discussion of Hamid's paper regarding eunuchs and khwajasarai in the Mughal royal court. Hamid provides an alternative to the procreative nature of Mughal sexuality. His research shows that eunuchs and self-castrated people were actually viewed as more willful and powerful than non-castrated men in Mughal court. These views were not uniform as khwajarsari were deemed as *mukhannas* (effeminate men) by various Islamic scholars and were marginalized in other locales. This raises a distinction, in my head, between being marginalized and being queer. To automatically assume that eunuchs and khwajarsa were viewed as 'queer' or 'othered' by most subcontinental societies is applying contemporary queer views and language back on the past. While a group can be somewhat marginalized within the period of history it existed, it does not mean that they were viewed themselves as queer or outside of the confines of society. Hamid asserts that procreative nature is only one aspect of masculinity and gender formation. This assertion can stand with the more common scholarly assertions of the penis and procreative ability as one of the main determinants of masculinity.

⁴⁴ See Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2003), and Jessica Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c.1850-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

Hamid recommended expanding my research to the construction of masculinity. He also noted that **panic is driven by fear of a different group**.

Professor Hamid mainly recommended secondary sources for understanding pre-colonial notions of sexuality. First was Scott Kugle's *When Sun Meets Moon: Gender, Eros, and Ecstasy in Urdu Poetry* (2016). Kugle's book examines a Hyderabadi man who has same-sex desire and undergoes a spiritual journey to understand said desire. Professor Hamid posed the following question in regards to this book: "What do you do when your identity/desire is marginalized/non-normative?"⁴⁵ He said some of the question I was grappling with hijra self-identity might have similarities for the Hyderabadi man in Kugle's book. Hamid also recommended Khaled El-Rouayheb's *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800* (2005). El-Rouayheb analyzes how homosexuality was was "schizophrenic" due to it being visible/tolerated and prohibited within Islam.⁴⁶ El-Rouayheb argues that this "paradox is based on the anachronistic assumption that homosexuality is a timeless, self-evident fact to which a particular culture reacts with some degree of tolerance or intolerance."⁴⁷ Professor Hamid also had a recommendation for further primary research. He recommended that I look at low level nobility to fill the gap of khwajarasai after the local market collapse of slavery and gradual extinction of the khwajasari under British rule.

⁴⁵ Usman Hamid, interview by the author, Hamilton College, June 21, 2021.

⁴⁶ The use of language has been a recurring critique as I have read many of these book. Schizophrenic is absolutely not the right word to use and further demonizes mental health. Professor Hamid and I discussed Gayatri Reddy's use of Western terms to compile

"Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800," *The University of Chicago Press Books Website*, <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/B/bo3613572.html>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Stina Soderling

Bio: Stina Soderling is the Elihu Root Postdoctoral Fellow and Visiting Assistant Professor of Women's and Gender Studies. Her research focuses on rural queer and intentional communities in the South. She has published articles ranging from queer time to anarchist pedagogy within the classroom. During her time at Hamilton she has taught LGBTQ studies and about the settler colonial state. Soderling received her B.A. in Women's Studies and International Relations from Smith College, and Ph.D. in Women's and Gender Studies from Rutgers University.

Stina and I talked about three main topics: language surrounding hijras, gender, and labor productivity through the lense of colonial regimes. Language is always an issue as it frames the topic and subject that the author is talking about. Words carry connotations that can inaccurately portray a subject within an assumed structure, often a Western one. But, Stina stated that a choice of language needs to happen.⁴⁸ The language might not line up perfectly with said expression or cover every facet, but then an author needs to acknowledge the limitations and problems surrounding such language. She recommended the introduction of *Queer in Translation: Politics under Neoliberal Islam* (2021) by Evren Savci, in which he traces intersections of queerness, Islam, neoliberal governance, and morality regimes.⁴⁹ He uses translation as a queer methodology to “evade the liming binaries of traditional/modern, authentic/colonial, global/local, and East/West—thereby opening up ways of understanding the social movements and political discouse that coalesce around sexual liberation in ways that do justice to the complexities both of what circulates under the signifier Islam and of sexual political movements in Muslim-majority

⁴⁸ Stina Soderling, interview by author, Hamilton College, June 30, 2021.

⁴⁹ “Queer in Translation: Sexual Politics under Neoliberal Islam,” *Duke University Press Website*, <https://www.dukeupress.edu/queer-in-translation>.

countries.”⁵⁰ While the book might not entirely pertain to my project, Stina stated that the introduction should work through the very same questions I posed regarding language.

The conversation leaned into academic interest surrounding gender expression in South Asia. Stina noted that Western academics could fall into the notion that anything that happens in the non-West is more close to nature.⁵¹ These academics seek to find previous expression of ‘queer identity’ to further legitimize queer identities in the West as normative. Therefore, discovering the “exotic” becomes the primary goal for the intellectual.⁵² I was reminded afterwards of Jean Jacques Rousseau's noble savage, the ‘nature’ Stina talked about, in this framework, is not what we Western queers can exactly return to, but what they can claim to be close enough to to legitimize themselves. Professor Trivedi recommended Chandra Mohanty’s “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.” Mohanty’s definition of colonialism focuses “on a certain mode of appropriation and codification of ‘scholarship’ and ‘knowledge’ about women in the third world by particular analytic categories employed in writings on the subject which take as their primary point of reference feminist interests as they have been articulated in the US and western Europe.”⁵³

Stina and I then talked about the similarities of the colonial project both in the United States and India. She mentioned that the U.S. was very focused on controlling indigenous family structures to prevent future rebellion or upheaval. These actions were coupled with attacks on indigenous access to land and laborial productivity. The U.S. argued that indigenous peoples controlled too much land that was not being used efficiently, therefore, whites needed to assert

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Stina Soderling, interview by author, Hamilton College, June 30, 2021.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Chandra Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Feminist Review* (1988) 30, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1057/fr.1988.42>, 61.

control over these very beings. Stina mentioned the Dawes Act, a law that provided the U.S. government the right to break up tribal lands. This regulation of land often was tied to gender roles. The colonial regime wanted to further 'emasculate' indigenous populations to further subjugate them. U.S. actions mirror British actions towards hijras. Further examining indigenous case studies in both the U.S. and India can create a larger picture of colonial mechanisms of power.

Madiah Akhter

Bio: Madiah Akhter is a historian of South Asia, the British empire, Muslim world, and princely India.⁵⁴ Akhter is currently a lecturer in history and H&S Dean's Postdoctoral fellow at Stanford University. Her research and teaching overlap with the feminist, gender, and sexuality studies departments as she started the trans history course at Stanford.⁵⁵ She has published articles ranging from courtesan agency in Lucknow to feminist self in Kishwar Naheed's "Buri Aurat ki Katha."⁵⁶ She is currently working on a manuscript entitled "In Her Own Right: Sovereignty and Gender in Princely India." and has conducted further research on gender in Bhopal.⁵⁷ Akhter received her B.A. in history from UCLA, M.A. in history from Tufts University, and Ph.D. from Stanford University.

I originally reached out to Madiah to ascertain any primary and secondary sources that she might have had as she is one of the experts regarding hijras in the field of history. At the beginning of the meeting we both pulled out the Hinchy monograph and Reddy ethnography. This was a clear sign that my research was on the right path, especially as Akhter said I should read both books as a background if I hadn't already. While Akhter has some of the most background of hijras (as a historian), her main speciality centered on princely India. She specifically mentioned Bhopal as a clear alternative to the colonial binary. Bhopal had a series of three women rulers and was the only place on the subcontinent where court dances were men.⁵⁸ My senior thesis could expand upon this project, comparing hijras with male court dancers in Bhopal.

⁵⁴ "Madiah Akhter," *Stanford Department of History Website*, <https://history.stanford.edu/people/madiyah-akhter>.

⁵⁵ Ibid; Madiah Akhter, interview by author, Zoom, July 1, 2021.

⁵⁶ Madiah Akhter CV, https://sites.duke.edu/stagingsovereignty/files/2015/10/MadiyahAkhter_CV.pdf, 2.

⁵⁷ "Madiah Akhter," *Stanford Department of History Website*.

⁵⁸ Madiah Akhter, interview by author, Zoom, July 1, 2021.

Akhter described the lack of documents referring to hijras as the main issue with the use of Mughal archives. There is little mention of hijras in the official Mughal archives. During the period of Mughal decentralization—beginning with the assassination of Emperor Furrukhsiyar in 1719 and culminating with Maratha control of Delhi in 1784 and then subsequent defeat of the Marathas in 1803 by the British East India Company—Muslim princely states assumed the role of imperial patronage and continued in the *khwajasarai* tradition.⁵⁹ But there is a transitory moment where the decline of *khwajasarai* leads to hijras receiving greater attention and patronage, occurring concurrently with greater British policing of gender and sexuality. The tradition of patronage was a hallmark of power and demonstrated the cultural-socio environment of various princely states that was at odds with British colonial officials.⁶⁰ Akhter posed two questions to further my research: how do hijras survive in the 18th and 19th centuries in princely states? How did their communities thrive?⁶¹ The answer in the space between both British and princely locales. Their interaction produced grounds for contradictory hijra narratives.

Akhter recommended four books to me. First was *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History* (1993) by Gilbert Herdt. The book examines gender from Byzantium, the Balkans, and London to India, Indonesia, and New Guinea. Akhter stated that this book was a flashpoint for trans history, indigenous gender studies, and launched new lines of inquiry, including a chapter on hijras by Serena Nanda. Akhter states that many of the issues present in Reddy's ethnography also exist throughout the Herdt. Next was *decolonizing trans/gender 101* (2014) by b. binaohan. While not an academic, binaohan seeks to disrupt

⁵⁹ Christopher Bayly, "India in the eighteenth century: the formation of states and social groups" in *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1998), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521250924.003>, 1 & 8.

⁶⁰ Madihah Akhter, interview by author, Zoom, July 1, 2021.

⁶¹ Ibid.

“hegemonic and imperial white trans/gender theory” and critique its universal legitimacy that “has widespread implications and consequences far beyond the borders of whiteness.”⁶² The book might help answer the questions of language and identity that both Professor Trivedi and I have been working through this summer. Next was *Hyderabad, British India, and the World: Muslim Networks and Minor Sovereignty, C.1850-1950* (2015) by Eric Lewis Beverley. Akhter recommended Beverly’s work because he examines how Hyderabad used urban planning as a way to push back against British rule. It would only add to a case study regarding Hyderabad. Finally she recommended Lawrence Cohn’s work as he critiques *Third Sex, Third Gender*, which helped reorient gender and trans studies. Each of these works will be pursued in the fall semester through an independent study with Prof. Trivedi.

⁶² “Decolonizing trans/gender 101,” *biyuti publishing* website.

Mahala Stewart

Bio: Mahala Stewart is a sociologist specializing in families, gender, race, class, and inequality. Her current book project compares “the schooling decision of black and white class-advantaged families.”⁶³ She has also led group Levitt projects on interracial couples and how parents navigated schooling during COVID. She is currently a visiting assistant professor at Hamilton College. She received her B.A. at the University of Maine, Orono; M.A. and Ph.D. at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Professor Stewart and I began by discussing the notion of childhood and family within Western scholarship. Stewart mentioned that childhood for various indigenous groups in the Americas was based on enjoyment, play, and freedom, most interestingly freedom in gender.⁶⁴ Stewart mentioned the *berdaches*, which are commonly referred to as two-spirit people. The term *berdache* is considered derogatory for most indigenous peoples as it is a Western term and roughly translates from French to mean ‘passive homosexual.’⁶⁵ Kin networks were also more loosely bound than in Europe. Indigenous communities generally had no connotation and private property and instead emphasized cooperativeness. It was also common for members of one kin network to share members with other networks when they needed help.⁶⁶ Children were largely expected to not work during adolescence. Colonial whites viewed children more as worker bees that helped ensure familial longevity.

⁶³ “Mahala Stewart,” *Hamilton College Website*, <https://www.hamilton.edu/academics/our-faculty/directory/faculty-detail/Mahala-Stewart>.

⁶⁴ Mahala Stewart, interview by author, Zoom, June 7, 2021.

⁶⁵ Stewart used the term before I knew its derogatory nature.

⁶⁶ Mahala Stewart, interview by author, Zoom, June 7, 2021.

The United States, in a similar manner to the British in India, interfered with indigenous labor practices and enforced the Western heteronormative nuclear family. White colonists believed the absence of capitalism and alternative familial structures in indigenous communities were unnatural and ungodly. The U.S. Government, using the Dawes Act as one of its main instruments, enforced labor distinctions within the home. The government sought to cement its control over indigenous groups. But there was a gendered element to this enforcement. The government believed that by “infantilizing” (directly interfering with indigenous sense of community and family) indigenous peoples. This is why the public vs. private dichotomy has been critiqued in recent years. Governmental actions often affect all aspects of life and can ignore the intentional harm towards a community.

This case study is somewhat useful when discussing India. Many of the same concerns and enforcement of Western norms were implemented by both the U.S. and British. The main difference is that direct interference within hijra families (removing children under a certain age from households) did not completely disrupt their communities. The British fundamentally misunderstood how hijras formed their own identities and, subsequently, community. In the U.S. context, British removal of children caused decades of trauma and loss of heritage. Many people who went through residential schools lost a sense of their own identity, while their tribe does not view them in the same light.

Professor Stewart recommended one major essay for me to read for my project: “Queering Family Scholarship: Theorizing from the Borderlands” from the *Journal of Family Theory & Review* by Katie Acosta. Acosta mainly focuses on how “inattention to race as an identity category” as it pertains to family “has limited its potential and scholarly theorizing

across difference.”⁶⁷ This would be a welcome addition to the independent study as it can help parse through caste within India.

Mariam Durrani

*Bio: Mariam Durrani is an anthropologist with focuses on cultural mobility, higher education in the United States and Pakistan, race, migration studies, gender, and Muslim youth.*⁶⁸ *Her current book project examines Muslim youth studying in New York City and Lahore, arguing that “aspiration for mobility is a key organizing principle to understand the construction of South Asian-origin, Muslim youth subject-making.”*⁶⁹ *She is currently an assistant professor of anthropology at Hamilton College. She was a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education and has taught at the University of New Mexico, Lahore University of Management Sciences, Hunter College, and the University of Pennsylvania.*⁷⁰ *Durrani received her B.S. from the University of Arizona, M.A. from the University of New Mexico, and joint Ph.D. in anthropology and education from the University of Pennsylvania.*

Professor Durrani and I talked about two main topics: queering and violence of the colonial project and language regarding hijras. At the beginning of the discussion, we talked about my use of queer as a verb. Classification of different identities must be achieved through direct violence. Violence was one of the only manners in which the British could enforce, create, and manage different types. At the heart of this management was a central question, “What is

⁶⁷ Katie L. Acosta, “Queering Family Scholarship: Theorizing from the Borderlands,” *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 10 (2018), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jftr.12263>, 406.

⁶⁸ “Mariam Durrani,” *Hamilton College Website*, <https://www.hamilton.edu/academics/our-faculty/directory/faculty-detail/Mariam-Durrani>.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

deviant?”⁷¹ Therefore, what is deviant must be put in place through violence. The process of queering and deviance are interconnected for the British regime, specifically bodily violence. The body becomes “a site of state management” which is demonstrated by the state’s preoccupenatn with prostitution, eunuchs, and hijras. British interference with the body, as well as familial structures, was an attempt to reorganize society. As Durrani stated, removing children from a household is never simply the point of child separation.⁷²

Our discussion surrounding language was incredibly eye opening. I mentioned Reddy’s incorrectly applying Western terms of sexuality onto hijras. Durrani stated that language is always going to be problematic as language is formed by the context within that period.⁷³ Trying to find the “correct” term leads the historian down an unsatisfactory path. One solution is recognizing differences. Specifically examining where and why certain terms come into existence or greater importance demonstrates the logic around said linguistic formation. Durrani also mentioned how Indigenous and Abolition studies are an important part of her theoretical frameworks. She emphasized that we are not finished with the systems of oppressions created by colonialism, they are very much still playing out. How could you even use the label postcolonial when those very same structures and themes are playing out in the contemporary moment?

Professor Durrani recommended two monographs to read. First was *Indian Sex Life* by Durba Mitra in which she examines the figure of the prostitute without having a uniform voice within the archive. The second was *The Intimacies of Four Continents* by Lisa Lowe. Lowe examines how intimacy, gender, and sexuality were created by colonial conditions and relationships between Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Durrani stated that the

⁷¹ Mariam Durrani, interview by the author, Zoom, July 13, 2021.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

introduction might be of interest to the summer project. I believe this would be an exemplary book to read for independent study in the fall.

Jessica Hinchy

*Bio: Jessica Hinchy is a historian of South Asian gender and sexuality and associate professor of history within the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. Hinchy's research has focused on hijras, to slavery and childhood, and household formations.⁷⁴ She received her Ph.D. from the Australian National University.⁷⁵ She is the author of the most important monograph on hijras, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c. 1850-1900*.*

Jessica Hinchy and I discussed three main topics: research materials and framing of my project, and cultural elimination and forms of power. To gain a sense of the contemporary context of the hijras, Hinchy recommended I look at newspaper articles from the 1990s. These articles would capture the urban middle-class' views towards hijras. She also mentioned that there were policing campaigns in urban cities (around the 90s) like Mumbai.⁷⁶ These are all potential avenues to pursue primary research for my senior thesis. Hinchy recommended that I look into the the Transgender Persons Protection of Rights Act, 2019, which critiqued by queer and trans activists and, according to Hinchy, undermined hijra and trans rights.⁷⁷ She encouraged me to examine the trajectory of this legislation, especially in the aftermath of *National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India* which recognized hijras as a third gender.

We discussed how recent changes in India need to be considered alongside a previous trajectory in which both political actions were possible: imperialism. Hinchy explained that the colonial regulation of sexuality , especially in India, was pursued through local legislative

⁷⁴ "Jessica Hinchy," *Academia* Website, <https://nanyang.academia.edu/JessicaHinchy>.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Jessica Hinchy, interview by author, Zoom, August 5, 2021.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

processes. While general priorities and laws were often set by the colonial regime, specific officials enacted these ideas at the local level in a variety of ways. Hinchy also noted that the colonial state was particularly concerned with the regulation of sexuality and what it deemed sexual deviance in so far as behavior was present and visible in urban spaces.⁷⁸ Anything the colonial state deemed to be sexually exual deviant was seen as a legitimate target of colonial policing in these urban spaces. Although all “deviant sexual behavior” was a concern, perhaps the major threat for the British in their colonies was sodomy. The British sought to curb the spread of sodomy from native men to British soldiers and officials through strict policing of the public. Hinchy asked a poignant question: but what happened at the level of private, every-day policing and what were its goals?⁷⁹

The British colonial state in India pursued policing and policies aimed at the elimination and extermination of the hijra community. Hinchy spent part of one chapter discussing the ‘genocidal’ nature of the British’s goal to exterminate the hijra, but in our conversation discussed the process as a form of **cultural elimination**.⁸⁰ She stated that cultural elimination has two parts: physical elimination of the hijra through policies that allowed the state to prosecute, interfere with property inheritance and possession, and police registration of hijras. The end goals of these approaches was to control if not erase the public presence of hijras, including their forms of work and dress, making them in effect invisible.⁸¹ The British colonial focus was on the body of the hijra. Hinchy suggested that genocide might not be the most useful term, as that label always harkens back to the “real thing,” the Holocaust. She acknowledged that there were key

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

differences between the Nazi Germany's actions against Jews, gypsies, and the disabled, and the British approach to hijras in India. Interestingly, while the Nazis publicly marked Jewish people with the Star of David to render them visible in public, the British were engaged in almost the opposite approach in their elimination and extermination of the hijras. Their goal by contrast was to render them invisible in public so as to lessen the threat to British colonial officials who otherwise might be tempted to adopt sexually deviant behavior while in the colony. Hinchy's conversation led to the conclusion that it could be better to think of genocide as a form of extinction and extermination. The **cultural extermination** that Hinchy defined is one part of a broader continuum, not always active and dependent on how involved all institutions and bodies are in achieving the state's goals. It is accurate to say that the colonial project has an inherently extinctionist and exterminationist modality. How might we consider contemporary state practices, including those that recognize hijras as a third sex, another form of colonial extinction and extermination policies?

Hinchy recommended a series of books and work in our discussion. First was Nicholas About's work on kwajasara and his emphasis on the discursive convergence between how elite men talked about hijras and kwajasara.⁸² Next was Ruth Vanita's *Gender, Sex, and the City: Urdu Rekhti Poetry in India, 1780-1870* (2012). Hinchy also recommended requesting Emily Kalb's, a recent UChicago Ph.D. graduate who Professor Hamid also knows, thesis. Hinchy also recommended *The Chaos of Empire: The British Raj and the Conquest of India* by Jon Wilson to have a better understanding of registration as governance. A monograph that has been constantly recommended is Durba Mitra's *Indian Sex Life: Sexuality and the Colonial Origins of Modern*

⁸² Jessica Hinchy, interview by author, Zoom, August 5, 2021.

Social Thought. Finally, Hinchy recommended *Fleeting Agencies: A Social History of Indian Coolie Women in British Malaya* (2021) by Arunima Datta to better understand problems of agency within the archive.

Conclusion

While the result from this summer was originally a 25 page-paper, the work and information I gathered this summer was invaluable. I was able to speak to some of the leading scholars in their field, especially Jessica Hinchy, who is the first historian to publish a monograph examining hijras on the subcontinent. Their thoughts and words have transformed the way I view hijras, the Indian subcontinent, and history itself. My work will only continue forward. I am planning to undertake an independent study in the fall with Professor Trivedi, reading the very books these scholars have suggested. I will primarily write précis for each work, preparing me for my honors history thesis in the spring. The work from this summer and the fall will only improve the accuracy and depth of my senior honors thesis which I will pursue in the spring 2022. Hopefully, this thesis will allow me to chart a new academic path after I graduate from Hamilton

Western scholarship has presented several limitations when understanding gender and sexual identities. Primarily is the assumption that contemporary terms can be reflected on the past. Precolonial expressions of identity did not match up to the current conceptions we currently have. Gender and sexuality in the West are also historically constructed. There has been a large amount of literature discussing ancient Greek sexuality regarding penetration and receiving. It

was normal for older men to penetrate younger men, but not the other way around. As any historical period shows, notions of gender and sexuality are not fixed. They are constantly in flux. After the COVID-19 pandemic, more men began growing their hair out, a trend that would not have been viewed as ‘interesting’ by society at-large.

This case study demonstrates the strength of identity studies. To understand how a person constructs their own gender and sexual identity provides a ground-up view of identity formation. Identity formation serves as a new avenue for scholars to bypass preconceived notions of gender and sexuality. It also provides agency to the individual. While societal norms exist, each individual internalizes and performs gender differently. It is not one uniform norm, but hundreds of formulation processes that often derives from a single origin point.

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