In Washington, D.C., a visiting celebrity of 1885 was from the Zuni tribe of the southwestern United States. Described as “a priestess and a princess,” the young woman named WeWha was 6 feet tall, with a self-possessed and dignified demeanor. WeWha had come to Washington on a diplomatic mission to represent the Zuni people, and her activities were reported in the newspapers. She demonstrated traditional weaving techniques, attended high society gatherings, and met the president. What was not described in the reports was that WeWha was a gender-fluid person, a lhamana, respected and acknowledged as such by her tribe. In this edited excerpt from his new book, Reclaiming Two-Spirits: Sexuality, Spiritual Renewal & Sovereignty in Native America, Gregory D. Smithers looks at WeWha’s life in context to address the question, “What place did people like WeWha have in a world being studied, parcelled off, and fetishized by white Americans?”

WeWha was born in 1849 in what is present-day New Mexico. They entered a Zuni world scarred from ravages of smallpox epidemics and the arrival of Anglo-Americans after the 1840s—outsiders who were pushy, overbearing, and often violent. On a diplomatic and military level, the Anglo-American presence compounded the pressures that Zunis and other Pueblo Indians felt from regular Apache and Diné raids, prompting an unlikely alliance between Zunis and the United States in the 1850s and 1860s.

The Zuni world of WeWha’s childhood was one of increasing contact with white Americans. Still, Zuni religious traditions persisted. Zunis remained connected to the kachinas [ancestral spirit beings], and they continued raising their children as they always had. For instance, at WeWha’s birth, no mention was made of gender. That’s because Zunis understood gender as something that a person grew into. Siblings between the ages of 4–6 didn’t refer to each other as brother or sister; instead, they used the nongendered term hanni to refer to one another. As WeWha developed during childhood, gendered interests and the cultivation of specialized skills emerged. WeWha’s biographer, Will Roscoe, notes that between the ages of 4–8, WeWha was “initiated into the chuba:kwe kiwitsinne or south kiva, the kiva of the husband of the midwife who assisted at his birth.” WeWha’s religious training began after this initiation. They learned songs, oral traditions, prayers, and kachina lore.

Among the stories WeWha learned was the Zuni tale of creation. Zuni origin stories included accounts of the ancestors traveling through four underworlds and eventually emerging on the surface of the Earth. Zunis used stories of Earth emergence to remind people of their connection to place. They also shared migration narratives to explain how
social differences reinforced the principle of reciprocity in guiding community members along the middle road to balance and harmony. This was the “Zuni way,” a code of conduct that connected everything in the universe and in which all life was sacred.

The kachina traditions play a critical role in this journey. They help illuminate key episodes in Zuni creation, from the underworld, to emergence on the surface of the Earth, to the development (or “cooking”) of social roles and identities. Zuni religion also explained the birth of the gods, war among the gods, and the ongoing quest to find the middle road. The kachina belief system reminded 19th-century Zunis of their responsibilities toward one another, provided moral guidance (such as taboos against incest), and explained the spectrum of gender roles.

One narrative, the story of the kachina spirit Ko’lhamana, highlights the dynamism of Zuni gender roles. In a battle between agriculture and hunter spirits, Ko’lhamana, the first of the captive kachinas, is detained by enemy spirits. While in captivity, Ko’lhamana transforms into a “man-woman,” a spirit with both male and female qualities.

The mixture of these gendered qualities empowered Ko’lhamana with the wisdom to mediate differences between the hunters and farmers—qualities that transcend this particular kachina tale and apply to the broader roles that lhamanas play in weaving together the social fabric of Zuni society.

In Zuni communities, as in other Native communities across North America, gender-fluid traditions came under sustained assault in the decades after the American Civil War. Those attacks did not come from booming cannons or the thunderous advance of approaching cavalry; they arrived in the form of American traders like Douglas D. Graham, eager to infiltrate markets in the pueblos. Attacks also came in the form of anthropologists and their pesky questions. Missionaries and Bureau of Indian Affairs officials also worked to understand some of the most sacred aspects of Zuni culture; ultimately, they tried to extinguish them through their implementation of assimilation policies and boarding schools.

Other non-Indigenous intruders arrived in Zuni society in the 1860s and 1870s. The Smithsonian Institution’s Bureau of American Ethnology led the charge into the American West. It sponsored expeditions to “salvage” Indigenous art, archaeology, language, and culture before Western culture swept it away. Leading these efforts was Frank Hamilton Cushing, whom the Zunis remembered as a show-off. Matilda Coxe Stevenson also spent considerable time among the Zunis (she sometimes wrote under the name Tilly E. Stevenson). Although Zunis considered her arrogant, Stevenson managed to develop a relationship with WeWha and was the driving force behind WeWha’s Washington tour in 1885. Stevenson hoped to use WeWha’s trip east to enhance her scientific reputation. WeWha, as we will see, had an interest in visiting Washington that did not entirely align with Stevenson’s aspirations.

Although she was ambitious, and willing to exploit Zunis to advance her ethnological career, Zuni people grew to trust Matilda Stevenson. The trust that Stevenson earned from Zunis relates to the close relationship she developed with WeWha. Stevenson met WeWha shortly after arriving at the Zuni Pueblo in 1879. She described WeWha as a “Zuni girl,” and over the coming years struck up a friendship of sorts with her. Stevenson described WeWha as “perhaps the tallest person in Zuni; certainly the strongest, both mentally and physically.” She added that WeWha’s intellectual skills enabled her to store the “lore of her people” in her memory and to inquire after new knowledge.
WeWha tested her skills as a mediator of different worlds when she accompanied Stevenson to Washington in 1885. WeWha’s visit proved the talk of the town, garnering Stevenson the attention she craved. But it was the celebrity of WeWha that soared, as did the speculation about her “true” identity. WeWha’s masculine features puzzled some onlookers, challenging white American stereotypes about “delicate” Indian “maidens.” In the company of Matilda Stevenson, a petite white woman, WeWha’s tall and masculine appearance was magnified. WeWha’s visit to Washington in 1885–86 exposed the racial chauvinism of American culture. Seemingly trivial reports of WeWha’s introduction to Easter eggs reminded readers of the gulf that existed between their own, superior, form of “civilization,” and the exotic appearance and antiquated “superstitions” that journalists ascribed to WeWha. In Washington, the American media fetishized WeWha’s every move and word.

Photographs of WeWha demonstrating her weaving skills underlined this point. In the capital city of an imperial, industrialized republic, pictures of WeWha operating a loom on the manicured grounds of the Smithsonian Institution reinforced the apparent gulf between white America and “authentic” Indians. Here, at the heart of American political power, sat a simple Indian, oblivious to the bustle of modernity swirling around them. Seated under a tree, cross-legged, as she performed for the Smithsonian’s cameras, WeWha was frozen in time—a human artifact from an era and a culture almost forgotten.

White America’s racial conceit blinded journalists and photographers to the roles that WeWha played on behalf of the Zunis in Washington between the fall of 1885 and the spring of 1886. For WeWha, the Americans themselves were also the objects of ethnographic puzzlement—the subject of one Zuni’s ethnological gaze. And what WeWha saw didn’t look terribly impressive. Americans were loud and showy. And “Washington women” talk too much, WeWha complained. WeWha was not in Washington simply to study the strange behavior and foreign traditions of white Americans. WeWha was in the capital city to negotiate. Like any conscientious lhamana, WeWha had a role to play as a mediator on behalf of the Zunis. And so, WeWha sat down to talk with President Grover Cleveland.

The journalists who covered WeWha’s visit to Washington couldn’t resist reporting on her meeting with Cleveland. In self-congratulatory tones, newspapers ran copy declaring that WeWha “greatly admires President Cleveland” and hoped he would win a “a second term.” These superficial reports missed the point of WeWha’s visit with the president. WeWha wanted something from Cleveland. She’d seen the problems caused by overzealous missionaries and corrupt Indian agents in Pueblo communities. Therefore, before she returned home in 1886, WeWha asked Cleveland to send an Indian agent who would protect Zuni interests. According to The New York Herald’s report of the meeting, WeWha “said the President looked very well and listened to all she had to say, and when she told him her people did not want a Mexican agent, but a Washington one, he said he would remember that.” Whatever WeWha said to Cleveland worked; a new agent was dispatched to the Zuni, prompting WeWha reportedly to declare that “the President no lie.”

WeWha was more than a curiosity. She was more than an object of racial fetishization—whom Stevenson claimed became lighter skinned in Washington—and more than the labels—cross-dresser, transvestite, masculine, berdache, princess, hermaphrodite—that white Americans used to describe and sometimes denigrate her. WeWha was a much-loved and widely respected keeper of Zuni knowledge, a caregiver to children, and a skilled negotiator. WeWha was neither male nor female, but both. WeWha
was a lhamana.

It is why her death was met with deep mourning in the Zuni Pueblo in 1896. Matilda Coxe Stevenson wrote that Zunis rushed to WeWha’s aid when they realized she was ill. With her heart failing, family and friends did all they could to ease WeWha’s suffering. Their efforts ended in sadness when she breathed her last. Zunis received the news of WeWha’s death with “universal regret and distress.” She was loved and cherished; now she was gone.

Other lhamanas followed WeWha. They forged their own path in an increasingly hostile world. They navigated a world in which white Americans criminalized Indigenous religion and culture and expressed utter disdain for them. This was an era in which Congress wanted greater control over every aspect of Native American life, establishing the “Indian police” in 1879 and passing the Major Crimes Act in 1885 to undermine Native sovereignty by placing a slew of crimes, such as larceny, arson, and murder, under federal jurisdiction. As the contours of the federal government’s assimilation policies took shape, one thing was certain: A majority of white Americans felt nothing but contempt for Indigenous traditions and spiritual beliefs. General Hugh L. Scott spoke for many when he lampooned the “berdache” [Indigenous transgender people], writing, “I am satisfied that the berdache is really nothing more than a degenerate and uses the ‘spirit’ story as an excuse for ignoble actions.”

Gender-fluid people in Indian Country faced heightened levels of hostility by the late 19th and early 20th centuries. WeWha’s brief celebrity proved an aberration. Over the coming decades, other lhamanas and gender-fluid people from different Native communities found it unsafe to be seen by white Americans. To survive, they had to keep their identities, their traditions, and their place in kinship communities private, lest white Americans try to destroy them. To effectively navigate the assimilation era—to survive—people like WeWha went underground. For some, that meant experiencing the emotional pain of being marginalized from kin. For others, it meant a loss of knowledge that would take decades to reclaim. As the 20th century dawned, the path into the future was paved with uncertainty.

This edited excerpt from Reclaiming Two Spirits: Sexuality, Spiritual Renewal & Sovereignty in Native America by Gregory D. Smithers (Beacon Press 2022) is reprinted with permission from Beacon Press.