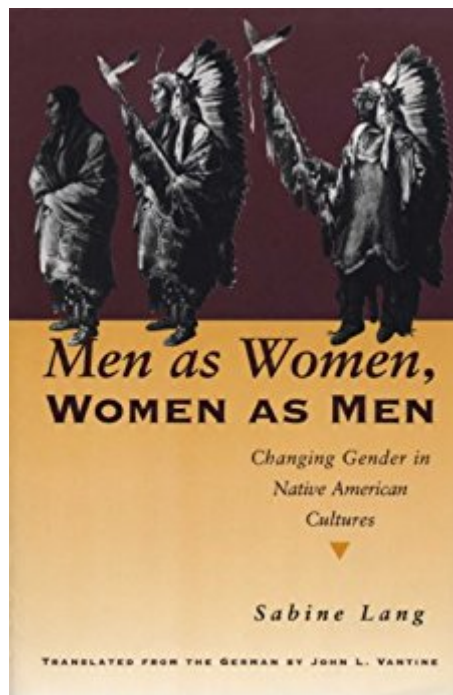




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Men As Women, Women As Men: Changing Gender In Native American Cultures



Synopsis

As contemporary Native and non-Native Americans explore various forms of "gender bending" and gay and lesbian identities, interest has grown in "berdaches," the womanly men and manly women who existed in many Native American tribal cultures. Yet attempts to find current role models in these historical figures sometimes distort and oversimplify the historical realities. This book provides an objective, comprehensive study of Native American women-men and men-women across many tribal cultures and an extended time span. Sabine Lang explores such topics as their religious and secular roles; the relation of the roles of women-men and men-women to the roles of women and men in their respective societies; the ways in which gender-role change was carried out, legitimized, and explained in Native American cultures; the widely differing attitudes toward women-men and men-women in tribal cultures; and the role of these figures in Native mythology. Lang's findings challenge the apparent gender equality of the "berdache" institution, as well as the supposed universality of concepts such as homosexuality.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Sabine Lang's book is a very welcome and long overdue addition to the literature in a field that has been too long characterized by fragmentary data, historical bias, "hijacked" social use, and blatant homophobia. Lang's lengthy effort to compile the extant data on "two spirits" from the disparate disciplines of cultural history, sociology, anthropology, and Native American studies represents a formidable achievement. The sheer volume of data would dissuade many scholars from attempting the task. One of the most successful aspects of the work is Lang's refusal to editorialize the data. In a field of study where it seems everyone wants to support a personal agenda with research findings or historical incident, Lang maintains distance, confining her comments to pointing out historical inconsistencies, poor fieldwork, or obvious bias on the parts of observer/recorders. Lang's demographic distribution tables are particularly helpful for those of us who study this and other aspects of North American Native social life. Equally useful is her sorting out, demystifying, and de-biasing the vocabulary applied, historically, to the two-spirit phenomenon. Lang "repatriates" the language of the two-spirit. She removes it from the white observers' always vague and often denigrating terminology and restores it to its Native language - which is different from group to group and deserves to be respected, not replaced, by white words and concepts (none of which arise from the socio-spiritual context of Native society.) I have many favorite parts of *MEN AS WOMEN*, *WOMEN AS MEN*, but Lang's descriptions of how Christianization of Native communities has all but obliterated the reverence for and "necessary-ness" of two-spirit individuals to Native communities and their spiritual life is, I think, one of the book's most delicately handled and poignant aspects. Anyone who says a scholarly text cannot be moving emotionally has not read *MEN AS WOMEN*, *WOMEN AS MEN*.

Men as Women, Women as Men is much more than what the title suggests. It is a book of the American Indians' way, view at one time, of how gay, lesbians, transgender and transsexual people had once been sacred. Revered in most tribes for the important roles they played in ceremonies and daily life. People they only saw as who they were. The book itself is filled with quite a bit of academic or scholarly terms but a lay person can read through it. I got this book to help with a paper I was writing for an anthropology class. As in the area I live it was unavailable in the libraries. I have enjoyed learning about some of my heritage, about how at one time in history, no Indian was ever thrown away for who they are.

The unintelligent and misinformed will be very much moved by this book. As hard as that may be to read, it needs to be said. As an avid advocate of LGBTQ rights, however, I am abhorred by how many

people believe this book to be a masterpiece. Far from being levelheaded and sensitive, this book uses wrong pronouns and terminology and comes off as being a biased and clinical assessment penned by straight cisgender people. Alas, the author cannot tell a gay man and a trans-woman apart, a fact that should be causing critics to pan this book as misinformed pap. The book also goes on to talk about how gay men and trans-women are more promiscuous, which is nothing more than the false beliefs of people far removed from reality. The author's knowledge on Native American culture, too, is limited and presents far too much on the viewpoints that emerged long after the reckless destruction wrought by the West. If anything, this book is a bleak reminder of how far this world still is from acceptance and understanding. Just because a well-intentioned person writes a book on an oppressed populace, this does not make them a true ally with any real knowledge. Skip over this book and read the much more informed "Transgender Warriors" by Lesli Feinberg, which paints a far more accurate picture of gender diversity amongst Native American cultures as well as various other cultures.

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