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*Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past.* By Peter Boag

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***Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past.* By Peter Boag.** Berkeley: University of California Press. 2011. Pp. xii+257, \$27.95 paperback.

The nineteenth-century American West conjures images of rugged, rough-riding cowboys and genteel, if promiscuous, saloon girls. These cartoonish characterizations are the stereotypical examples of life in the “Old West,” and illustrate the binary set of gender identities created and then reinforced by frontier mythologies of the time. Peter Boag seeks to widen the scope of characterizations available to those who ventured West by including those who did not neatly fit into the rugged, heterosexual masculinity narrative of the era. As transgender children become increasingly discussed in American communities and issues of gender neutrality in schools surface, this work seems more significant to the American consciousness than ever. Accordingly, Boag’s examination of cross-dressing in the American West thoughtfully and expertly charts the lives of multiple subjects—both men who dressed as women and women who dressed as men—to track the larger narrative of homosexuality and transgender life on the American frontier. The result is a captivating story of the unique yet ubiquitous nature of both transvestitism and transgender people in the mythic frontier West.

Part one of the book examines the lives of the men and women who chose, for various reasons, to live as the opposite gender. Here Boag convincingly argues that communities and the popular press found it easier to remake women dressed as men into entrepreneurial, hardy, and brave examples of the opportunities the West could provide for people looking to start anew. Alternatively, men who dressed as women provided a much tougher debate in regards to the masculine aura of the frontier and the general public’s confusion as to why a man, given a place of power as part of the “superior” gender, would want to resort to becoming a member of the “weaker” sex. The result of this discussion is the excellent conclusion that “though western women’s cross-dressing would be accounted for, rationalized, regendered, and resexualized within the context of the American West and frontier, this would not be so for male-to-female cross-dressers, which is why the richness of their numbers and stories remains obliterated from our collective and popular memories about the American West and the frontier” (91).

Part two explores the process of “making the American West and the frontier heteronormative” through discussions of the popular press’ emphasis on jilted and abused women becoming men, the marginalization and dismissal of male-to-female cross-dressers through race, and how sexologists dismissed the prevalence of cross-dressing as a result of modernity and the pressures of an urban lifestyle, essentially framing it as a mental illness resulting from the stress of the era (93). The multiple examples of people firmly rooted in their communities who were spurned after death upon discovery of their “true” sexes are heartbreaking, and act as an important foundation for Boag’s argument that community responses, while somewhat varied, were often similar in the face of the inevitably shocking burial preparation discoveries. In this vein, Boag only discusses the corporeality of his subjects’ bodies when absolutely necessary, and at all times in a respectful manner. Similarly, he discusses their lives using the pronouns with which they most associated, and never loses sight of the human stories and his subjects’ personal triumphs and struggles. All the while, Boag uses these details and stories to craft an excellent argument about cross-dressers in the frontier West and how they were viewed by their families, friends, and larger communities.

Based largely on primary source materials, Boag’s meticulous research and compelling arguments offer an excellent contribution to the fields of gender and sexuality studies, social history, and the history of the American West. His rigorous but accessible style is suitable for both academic and general audiences, and both will be challenged and intrigued by his arguments. By calling into question the popular narrative of the mythic American West, Boag offers a fascinating addition to the story and contributes greatly to the knowledge of America’s frontier past.

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