recognising transsexuals: personal, political and medicolegal embodiment

Zowie Davy, Ashgate, UK, 2010, 204pp., ISBN: 978-1-4094-0565-8, £55.00 (Hbk)

The mind/body question is one that has occupied philosophers since the time of Plato, and it has echoes in the debates between transgender and queer theorists and what we might term transsexual theorists. Simply put, the academic transsexual discourse suggests that hugely influential feminist gender theorists such as Judith Butler, in their consideration of transgender identities, do not pay sufficient attention to the questions of embodiment that are central to the self-understanding of trans people. In this book Davy refocuses trans debates on coming to a better understanding of trans people's bodily aesthetics, 'the appearance of the body that is subjected to [personal and/or public] judgements' (p. 5), as lived through their body projects. It is these socio-historically situated body projects, Davy contends, that form their trans-gendered identities rather than vice versa.

Davy proposes a socially and sexually situated phenomenology as the bodily basis for identity, and in so doing sets herself in opposition to pre-social essentialist concepts of sex-based gender. She announces her opposition to both the heteronormative psycho-medical model of transsexualism, which relies on and informs the 'wrong body' trope, and to the work of feminists such as Janice Raymond and Sheila Jeffreys, who rely on this analysis as the basis for what I and other transfeminist writers understand to be their aggressive and discredited attacks on transsexualism.

Davy engages transmen and transwomen separately in exploring the 'various processes used in order to attain acceptable bodies [...] before, during and after transitioning' (p. 69). In discussing her respondents' bodily aesthetic projects in one-to-one interviews, she explores the varied ways that her participants understood these processes as necessary to attain the required markers for their being recognised as authentically gendered. In emphasising variety, Davy points to the experiences of her respondents as evidence of the inadequacy and restricted nature of the hegemonic psycho-medical 'wrong body' discourse.

In the legal context of the United Kingdom, Davy acknowledges the unevenly progressive framing of the Gender Recognition Act (GRA) as '... not simply [] an assimilationist model of "sameness" but also transformative, because [in not requiring candidates to have Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) before they can change their legal identity] it allows for bodily diversity' (p. 158). She cites one of her (politically active) respondents as recognising

that the framing of the GRA represents a move away from the medical to a legal model for trans rights. In allowing for bodily diversity, the Act also crucially opens up formal space for trans people to gain recognition within the socio-legal sphere whilst undertaking their bodily projects within a general trans aesthetic rather than a wholly transformative transsexual transition. Legal recognition by the GRA for trans people not undergoing full physical transition is crucial for many trans people, but also has implications for the way gendered embodiment is more broadly understood.

Davy recognises the complexities of nomenclature when discussing trans issues; however, in a field where linguistic sensibilities and sensitivities are subject to constant revision and contestation, perhaps her adoption of the term 'transsexual' in the title could have been usefully substituted for something less clearly associated with the restrictive nature of medico-legal discourse that she is at pains to discredit. Equally, although she offers justification for discussing transmen's and transwomen's experiences separately, insofar as transmen and transwomen '... constitute their bodily aesthetic with strategic agency, but in markedly different ways' (p. 109), I suggest that what her research actually confirms is a deeper truth. Her participants reveal themselves in their search for cultural intelligibility in such varied ways that their narratives reflect an underlying logic facing all transsexual and transgendered people, not only those who identify as transsexual. Drawing out the underlying imbrications of individual trans gendering experiences is one of the timely triumphs of this book.

To be trans in the United Kingdom in 2012 is to be situated at the nexus of rapidly developing social and medico-legal environments wherein understandings of transness, by trans people and non-trans people alike, are altering (and being altered by) the legal, medical and social fields that we inhabit. In this book Davy convincingly draws trans embodiment back into focus, and in engaging with socio-legal and medico-legal discourses, contextualises it at points that have dramatic ongoing impact on the ability of trans people to both gain recognition and to fulfil (notwithstanding external constraints) the aesthetic bodily projects at the heart of their identities.

This is a sophisticated and timely book that engages with what have at times seemed to be oppositional transgender/transsexual discourses. In acknowledging that gender identities are historically situated and inseparably intertwined with embodied identities, it gives a gendered coherence to the domain of trans theorising that places lived embodied trans identities right at its heart. It represents a definitive move away from any suggestion of privileging of either mind or body in some previous trans theorising, to a more satisfactory and sophisticated model of sexgendered cohesion.

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doi:10.1057/fr.2012.34