Nearly all the chapters dealt with the issue of researcher reflexivity, some with varying degrees of humour about and frustration with the racism and hierarchy of the academy. The frustration is useful to note for it pushes toward a structural analysis that is important for analyzing issues of reflexivity in feminist research, since reflexivity must mean more than self-referentiality. Another important contribution of the book is the discussion of institutional contexts of knowledge production, in the introductory chapter as well as the other essays. The editors are very self-conscious of this text as a theoretical intervention, a commodity, and a performance; on all these levels, this is a timely, critical project that raises important academic, political, and cultural questions.

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Reading Sex and the City

Kim Akass and Janet McCabe (editors); IB Tauris, London, 2004, ISBN 1 85043 423 9, £12.95

In the Introduction to *Reading Sex and the City*, the authors state that one of the central aims of this anthology of 17 thematic essays 'is to locate new ways of speaking and thinking about a popular cultural text that continues to be a site of contestation' (p. 7). This book is a timely assessment of *Sex and the City* and the essays read very much like 'a work in progress' with all of the interrogative perspectives being located under a specific section. The impact of feminism, as discussed in the essay by Astrid Henry, has indeed enabled the very context and content of this series, and it would be impossible to position this product without the multi-faceted feminist debates having been had.

Its narrative focus is the single woman, sexually active, careerist and consumer. However, its content returns us to well-established generic conventions about gender roles. The self-perceived narrative radicalism of *Sex and the City* unfolds in two ways. It explores both the celebration of the changing social and economic shifts experienced by some working women, while also providing us with a platform through which to consider how these very changes have led to complex and contradictory constraints. Capitalisms' ability to absorb these shifts formulates the narrative drive of this series, with desire and gratification being at the centre of every episodic turn. Social and economic contradictions are addressed only through fantasy. Escapism and compulsion are the categories through which we are asked to investigate both femininity and masculinity. Compulsive modes of behaviour, with body adornment being the major source of gratification through shopping for shoes, clothes, perfume, eating or having sex, are all represented through the experience of excess. This excess focuses the narrative 'realism' of each episode and all feminine characteristics are judged through the over

determined use of an individually ascribed archetype. The authors (Akass and McCabe) rightly address the fact that in many ways the contradictory nature of *Sex and the City* is such that it both ridicules and 'celebrates the objectification of the glamorous, toned white female body' (p. 197).

In his essay 'The Museum of Unnatural History' David Greven widens this debate further by contrasting the representations between women as 'rampant consumers' and 'the show's depiction of males as freakish objects' (p. 39). To what extent does the series conform to a celebration of the culture of consumption? Perceived transgressive sexuality, in this case represented through the character of Samantha, is punished via cancer and this bears more than a passing resemblance to the treatment of women in the classic film noirs of the 1940s (see Mildred Pierce Dir. Curtiz, 1945). Additionally, 'the end of an era' is characterized in the last series through the only single, and self-proclaimed sexually predatory, woman to kill herself as she trips on her expensive shoes and falls out of the window of a high-raised apartment block. Comedy and tragedy are both experienced and witnessed by the main characters here. 9/11 is referenced but never contextualized, which is the main weakness of this televisual soap. Devoid of politics, the original voice piece for the series, Carrie, looks on at this violent death but is outside of it. She is a passive voyeur in a world where she still defines herself through her lack of Mr Darcy — it is not until all characters find their romantic other that the series can come to an end. *Sex and the City* is more Mills and Boom than *Pride and Prejudice*, which is frustrating since in many ways this series has helped to define a generation.

For the most part, the voices in this anthology approach their subject as adulating fans and the reader must embrace this prospect rather than be frustrated by the book's overall lack of critical detachment. Rigorous in parts, both fashion and the American city are contextualized in ways that add much to contemporary discourses on visual culture. In this respect, the essays by Mandy Merck and the collaborative endeavour by Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson are excellent contributions. The role of female 'evidence' and autobiography is unpacked in an interesting and insightful way in Deborah Jermyns' essay and the function of humour in undercutting 'female investment in patriarchal fantasies' (p. 185) in the essay by the co-authors Akass and McCabe begins to problematize what *Sex and the City* does so well. This book has some significant essays but others could have done with having a more critically sustained engagement with their subject matter. To what extent does *Sex and the City* raise issues about the contemporary world and the representation of women's experience within this world? *Reading Sex and the City* attempts to forge a dialogue in relation to this question and although it could have gone much further than it does, it is still an important contribution to the debate.

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