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transgender experience: place, ethnicity, and visibility

Edited by Chantal Zabus and David Coad, Routledge, New York and London, 2014, 172pp., ISBN 978-0-415-65616-0, \$80.00 (Hbk)

The anthology *Transgender Experience* is the output of the international conference ‘Transgenres: Nouvelles Identités et Visibilités’, held in Paris in 2009. The motivation for the book is to reflect on the three themes of place, visibility and ethnicity, which at the time of the conference had been explored very little in the still fairly new field of transgender research. The ten short articles (seven to thirteen pages long) of the book are grouped under these themes; however, in the specific analyses of the articles the three aspects are often entangled, as the editors themselves are aware. The choice of themes followed an international call among transgender scholars to focus on various geographical contexts with specific ethnicised and racialised populations, as well as on different experiences of gender variance and transgender selves, and to connect these themes to local, national and sexual economies, social practices, and available technologies (p. 2). France is the most extensively studied case in the book, but other less analysed local contexts such as Italy, California, the Philippines, New York, Nebraska, Germany, Switzerland, Great Britain, New South Wales, Canada and South Africa are also included.

The first two articles of the anthology are Maxime Foerster’s history of transsexuals in France, and an extract of the novelistic biography of the famous French performer Bambi (Marie-Pierre Pruvot), describing her early childhood memories of her family life in the 1940s. The oscillation from a broader picture to the highly personal and experiential/(auto)biographical style within the same text, or juxtaposing these styles in the multiple texts, is characteristic of the anthology, and is often achieved in ways that are both very informative and moving. The large differences between international and local tendencies in production of knowledge, politics of (the lack of) trans health care, and trans* communities’ strategies to deal with such politics are striking. This highlights the relevance of producing local studies, as it (again) becomes clear that Anglo-American trans* studies can hardly be generalised to contexts outside this geographical realm, as the situation for transpeople varies widely, even between neighbouring countries. For example, as Foerster’s article demonstrates, even though Harry Benjamin’s definitions and formulation of standards for trans health care were in some ways internationally influential, in France it was Lacanian psychoanalytical definitions of transsexualism as a form of psychosis, and arguments against medical treatment of transpeople with hormones and surgeries, that from the 1950s to the beginning of the 2000s shaped the national politics. Throughout the book, the exploration of conditions and discourses in local contexts demonstrates the richness of understandings and perspectives, and transpeople’s creativity in dealing with local forms of in/visibility, stigmatisation and discrimination. The book shows how often in a local context, one person’s activities and influence have been more important for the conditions of transpeople in that locality, than have been global discourses.

As the themes of place, ethnicity and visibility run as red threads through most of the texts, their thematic division in the anthology might seem somewhat arbitrary, and at times even

counterintuitive or somewhat problematic. For example, in my view, articles by David Coad, Chantal Zabus and Eveline Kilian would have fitted better under a theme of 'space' rather than under 'visibility', together with two more articles. Coad's analysis of the documentary *Becoming Julia* is about a transwoman's return to the small town where she had grown up after transitioning in Sydney. Chantal Zabus' 'Trans Africa' analyses the memoirs of a South African lesbian sangoma (healer) and Zulu understandings of persons labelled as transgendered in European contexts as being possessed by ancestors of the opposite sex. And Eveline Kilian's 'Claiming space: transgender visibility in the arts' explores expressions of transgender formations and identities in various material, as well as linguistic spaces within literature, film, photography and performance. Thus, they all deal with specific geographical/local spaces (although some are depicted in fiction), as well as more metaphorical and emotional notions of creating and claiming spaces for transpeople, and it could have been interesting to highlight this through a theme.

Furthermore, Ludwig Trovato's text 'My sex is in my head' is oddly grouped under 'place' though it does not deal with that, and the text seems not to fit any of the themes, with its at once highly poetic and concrete autobiographical narrative about Trovato's experiences since childhood of his discovery and exploration of his bodily sexual impulses and reactions. This text explores how Trovato's bodily sensations are always entangled with a process of articulating his sense of self and sexual identity. He defines this identity as *transsexuality*, thereby creatively reappropriating the term from medical discourse and conventional definition to describe a desire for playful, humorous and risky sexual experiences that oscillate between maleness and femaleness, masculinity and femininity, and at the same time are never unambiguously one or the other.

Finally, in my view it is unfortunate to place only two articles under 'ethnicity', namely, Vernon Rosario's about the changing identifications and practices of gender-variant Latino adolescents visiting a clinic for LGBT persons in Los Angeles, and Susan Stryker's analysis of how the whiteness of Christine Jorgensen's performance as herself in the Filipino comedy *Kaming Mga Talyada* from 1962 about the adventures of seven feminine brothers serves as the basis for postcolonial resistance. The placement of these articles has the effect of accentuating non-white contexts as 'ethnic', while, for example, Coad's article could also be considered an analysis of the construction of Australian whiteness. Had the articles in the book not been divided under separate themes, such effects would have been avoided, and perhaps the complexity of their topics would have been better highlighted.

Overall, this slender book is incredibly rich in content, and shows that there is great potential for producing many more studies and developing theories in relation to the vibrant topic it addresses. It is promising and exciting that the articles in the collection all open up new questions and perspectives that have not been discussed and analysed in depth before, but simultaneously frustrating that they are only briefly sketched out. It leaves this reader hungry for much more, and eager to throw herself into conducting research in the same vein.

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