

Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category

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Imagining Transgender by David Valentine is an ethnography based on observations of the transgender community in New York City. It is the Ruth Benedict Book Prize winner of 2007 and the Lambda Literary Award Finalist for 2008. It is structured into three parts: The category “transgender”, transgender community and identity issues; and the emergence of transgender studies. The book brings together theoretical and political questions, rigorous qualitative research, and thick empirical descriptions about a “population” which, over the last two decades, has become politically important and increasingly influential in the United States (Currah et al. 2008; Stryker 2008). Success of the transgender movement is mirrored in the first federal legislation in the US to include gender identity discrimination: The Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act was signed into law in October 2009.

Transgender, as a collective category of identity refers to a diverse array of individuals whose gender identity does not match the assumed gender based on the sex category assigned at birth. This includes persons who identify as the “opposite sex” but also individuals who identify as gender-variant beyond the binary sex category system. Especially in the last two decades transgender identity politics have challenged popular and academic understanding of the relationship between gender and sexuality (Broad 2002; Stryker and Whittle 2006). Focusing on discourse Valentine takes a Foucauldian perspective (Drolet 2004) and asks how the claim that gender and sexuality are distinct may be *productive* of this very distinction rather than descriptive. Valentine employs an intersectional lens on inequality and

thus asks who is left out by the contemporary political and academic framing of intersections between race, class, gender, and sexuality.

Valentine describes his late night fieldwork as he rides his bicycle through the streets of New York City, handing out safer-sex kits in sex work areas. His rich description allows the reader to accompany him to bars, drag balls, the Transgender Health and Education Clinic, support groups, town hall meetings, lobby events, and conferences. The data were collected during eighteen months of fieldwork in the late 1990s as part of the Gender Identity Project (GIP). The GIP was part of the (formerly named) Lesbian and Gay Community Center in New York. In addition Valentine worked as a volunteer for Riki Wilchins (activist and founder of several direct- action groups for transgender rights in the US). The rich data substantiates his main argument that

...the bald assertion of the separateness of gender and sexuality ignores the complexity of lived experience, the historical constructedness of the categories themselves, the racial and class location of different experiences and theorizations of gender and sexuality, feminist understandings of gender and sexuality as systemic and power-laden, and transforms an analytic distinction into a naturalized, transhistorical, transcultural fact (p.62).

While Valentine’s original goal was to compare different branches in transgender communities, he soon came to understand that most people he met in the field did not know the term ‘transgender’ or were hesitant to define it. The low- paid service workers and sex workers he studies typically identified as “gay”, or used specific gender identifications like “butch/fem queen” rather than referring to themselves as “transgender”. The fact that Valentine’s participants did not utilize transgender as identity category

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led the author to rethink his project and eventually present an *Ethnography of a Category*, which is also the subtitle of the book.

Using the metaphors of “cycling” and of “mapping” to organize his findings, Valentine describes how social practices, discourses, sites, and people shape the “imaginary” of a transgender community. The mapping metaphor revolves around four broad themes, which are organized in 3 sections and 6 chapters. Part I of the book, “Imagining Transgender”, summarizes the rise and institutionalization of transgender as a collective term to incorporate all and any variance from imagined gender norms. In his comprehensive overview on the U.S. debate on the category of transgender, Valentine elaborates on how transgender came to be conceptualized as a utopian mode of action as well as an identity category. He also touches upon the somewhat difficult relationship between the LGB and “the T” in U.S. history, as the inclusion of gender variant individuals in the LGBT umbrella is still seen as problematic by many activists from “both” sides. Valentine supports the view that Stonewall was a central moment in gay/lesbian and transgender movements, although those distinctions were not operative in 1969 since the “sorting out” of gendered and sexual identities did not begin until later in the 1970s.

Since then, a great deal of work has been done on gendered and sexual identities, reflected in changes in psychological diagnostic criteria such as removal of homosexuality from the DSM in 1973, and the subsequent addition of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) in 1980. Prior to the establishment of this new category, gendered and sexual identities were understood through the categories of homosexuality and transvestism. The notion that “gender” underpins “transgender” and marks it as distinct from the focus on “sexuality” of mainstream LGB politics also plays out in the “complex land between gay/lesbian and transgender” (p.120).

Valentine agrees with Duggan and Hunter (1995) that the mainstream LGBT movement has relied upon homonormative assertions by favoring assimilationist gay organizations. He argues that if gay and transgender activists continue to insist on the ontological distinction of their identities, they reinforce the racialized and class-inflected diversity politics of the mainstream lesbian and gay movements. Following this discussion, Valentine provides a comprehensive, ethnographic exploration of gender and sexuality as distinct analytical categories themselves.

In Part II of the book, Valentine convincingly shows how this analytical distinction does not work in every gender-variant lifeworld. His analysis of support group meetings and three different drag balls reveals a far more complex organization of sexuality and gender (presented in accessible tables) and substantiates the claim that the analysis of gender variance and homosexuality far exceeds the boundaries of the traditional categories “sexuality” and “gender”. He argues that

the employment of the transgender category in institutionalized contexts cannot account for the experiences of the socially most vulnerable gender-variant people. With extensive personal narratives of the research participants the reader dives into very diverse transgender scenes, e.g. from the sex work area in the Meat Market to the Night of the Thousand Gowns drag ball. The participants, events and locations in the book are alive and colorful.

The third and fourth broad themes are covered in Part III, “Emerging Fields”. Beginning with a critique of activism, identity politics, and social theory in the U.S., Valentine holds social scientists and social theorists responsible for losing sight of individuals who do not fit standard definitions and categories. Inevitably, violence is the result.

Physical violence against transgender persons has been a central impetus for the activism Valentine discusses in Chapter 5. In fact, the book is dedicated to Vianna-Faye Williams, who was murdered during the field research for this book. Valentine’s conceptualization of violence does not remain on an interpersonal physical level; he opens up the floor for a broader, symbolic, notion of violence. Consistent with postmodernism (Drolet 2004), Valentine understands violence as a complex cultural category—drawing in both the visceral reality of murder and violation—but also a set of representations, discourses and stories about such social realities. He points out that structures such as the state must be understood as perpetrators of violence through restriction and reshaping of citizenship (p. 228). The author’s focus is on discourse as violence, for example the analysis of material from the second Transgender Lobby Days 1997 in Washington, revealing structural violence such as discrimination in employment, housing, and health care.

Valentine specifically addresses symbolic violence when he reflects on how his own research and note-taking might have violated transgender space and suggests that ethnography itself may be considered as a set of violent practices. Validity is established through the author’s constant reflection of his subjectivity. His location as gender-normative, male-bodied gay white middleclass individual is addressed on several occasions throughout the book, and he does not hesitate to talk about difficult situations in the field such as not being welcome or “sticking out like a sore thumb” with his suit and notebook in a bar. By addressing his own subjectivity and relationality to the research subjects Valentine again makes clear how conventional/psychiatric diagnostic meanings of categories are transgressed in empirical reality.

Valentine notes that the emerging field Transgender Studies includes a wide range of very diverse and contradicting scholarly contributions. In this sense, there is no unity in the field in regard to theoretical, methodological, or

political frameworks. For Valentine, the unifying center is the idea that a group of people can be understood through the category of transgender, which, again, emphasizes the recursive relationship (and its implied problems) between the evidence of transgender community existence through writing about it.

This book offers a comprehensive overview of how individuals who were motivated to find a transgender community comprehend and *imagine* transgender. Simultaneously, it bears evidence of how many of Valentine's participants do not (want to) fit this category at all and thus remain elusive in this discourse. The participants who do not fit are mainly participants of color and from working-class backgrounds who might fall off of the grid if researchers do not re-evaluate the social construction of transgender.

Valentine's book has the limitation that his sample is almost exclusively made up of male-to-female transgender individuals. He attempts to compensate for the lack/limitation of missing female-bodied persons through the incorporation of literature about the transgender-butcht debate and drag king cultures. Although Valentine shares much about his methods, and he scatters references to his research process throughout the book, a Methods Appendix would have been helpful for the reader interested in qualitative research. Whereas ethical questions are often marginal in research reports, Valentine has made such questions a central axis of analysis.

Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category is an important read for activists, scholars, teachers,

graduate students, and advanced undergraduates across disciplines interested in gender theory. It will also be an eye-opening read for case workers, counselors, therapists, and clinical psychologists, as it convincingly challenges the familiar analytical separation of gender and sexuality and encourages scholarly self-reflection when applying these categories and diagnoses. It is, in any case, a compelling example for ethnographers and qualitative researchers more generally in how to represent the research process and to utilize one's own subjectivity in the creation of knowledge. Both are vital components of rigorous qualitative research that, unfortunately, we do not see often enough in the literature.

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