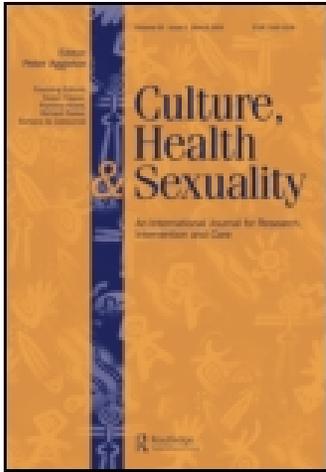


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Trans: transgender life stories from South Africa

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BOOK REVIEW

Trans: transgender life stories from South Africa, edited by Ruth Morgan, Charl Marais, and Joy R. Wellbeloved, Auckland Park, South Africa, Jacana Media, 2009, 220 pp., US\$ 23.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-920196-22-6

‘If you are silent about your pain, they’ll kill you and say you enjoyed it’ proclaimed author Zora Neale Hurston, writing during the US civil rights movement. Silence and pain are certainly central to the lives of many trans people. The term ‘trans’, also the book title, can be read as being inclusive of different ‘types’ of trans-identified people. The idea of transsexualism/transgenderism alone has long been unmentionable in most contexts owing to longstanding stigma and prejudice. More recently there has been more discussion of the topic in popular public fora, notably on talk shows, but increased public attention has not necessarily been positive or helpful. Indeed, misinformation, sensationalism and prejudice abound, often compounding misunderstanding and discrimination (Whittle, Turner, and Al-Alami 2007). More often than not, definitions and explanations are foisted upon trans people.

Trans gives voice to the personal stories of trans people, thereby humanising the issue and offering an opportunity for self-definition to those who have been long silent and silenced. This is especially valuable considering the pejorative ways that trans people have been (mis)represented. This landmark text (within South Africa and abroad) is a product of an extensive oral history project undertaken by two South African organisations, Gender Dynamix and Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action. It comprises 26 personal narratives of transition collected over two years, as well as photographs of each narrator to accompany their story, a glossary, archival material, body maps and interesting discussion material.

The narrators’ voices sometimes converge with one another, producing a recognisable narrative form. This could be considered as a canonical transition narrative that most often begins with gender non-conformity in childhood and then proceeds through the following key events: realisation of difference, a belief that a spontaneous bodily change will occur and dismay when it does not, distress induced by puberty, and a turning point with regard to whether/how to transition. Notably, as gatekeepers for those who wish to transition, the medical establishment and psy-profession are central to most accounts. Though there may be commonalities, there is often great diversity too. The stories reveal that the process of sense-making and identity negotiation is highly personal and idiosyncratic. Their experiences are mediated by history, race, social class and loved ones’ responses. Some stories are more or less neatly resolved at their end, while others point to the ongoing process of transitioning. My sense was that this experience of perpetual incompleteness amplifies the experience of all people as we continually renegotiate our identities and perform acceptable selves.

From a scholarly perspective, this collection concretely demonstrates the impossibility of existing as a social agent outside of the terms of gender. ‘Gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences’ (Butler 1999, 420) and the disciplinary consequences of gender non-conformity reverberate throughout these stories, ranging from familial

rejection to unlawful detention and violence. Most disturbing in this regard are the stories of African nationals who have sought sanctuary in South Africa from the entrenched and systematic persecution. It is clear from these stories that it is our *enactment* of gender that counts, and that this enactment occurs under duress (Butler 1999). For instance, the narrators recount how as children they were (forcibly) discouraged from engaging in the 'wrong' games or dress, particularly after puberty. They also relate decisions around whether to 'go stealth' (6) and 'pass' (263) (as a female or male) or to disclose the facts of their gender reassignment.

These accounts drive home the notion that gender is not the result of choice, since we are compelled to recite the norm in order to maintain our viability as social subjects. Our choice, then, is not whether to repeat gender norms, but how to go about doing so. Gender performances are therefore equivalent to a cultural survival strategy within compulsory hetero-patriarchal systems (Butler 1999). This cannot be clearer than in the strategic gender enactments that the narrators recount as they describe their navigation of the interstitial space in which they find themselves. For them as trans people the process of 'doing gender' appears to be beset with ambivalence. They vacillate between decisions of whether to disclose to others or not. Importantly, they get stuck between positioning themselves as both/and in relation to gender (e.g., Petra describes herself as an 'in-between person' [75]) and the either/or positions allowed by our binary categories of female/male. This is related to repeated, wavering claims that can be summed up as: 'I am (not) my body!' For the most part, the body is central to the narrators' claims about gender and, thus, largely based on a biological foundation – hence the desire to alter their bodies in order to comply with the law of two sexes. Nevertheless, there are times when this position is refuted and a more free-floating idea of gender is evoked as narrators make claims such as 'It's not a penis that makes a man' (87).

Reading as a feminist scholar, I found this text thought-provoking and oftentimes challenging. It raised a number of important questions about gendered identity and sexualities. I too found myself caught in a quandary. On one hand, I acknowledge the difficulty, perhaps impossibility even, of occupying a subjectivity that does not fit neatly into preordained dual gender categories, as discussed above. Having experienced the pain of gender non-conformity myself, I also understand that this is not merely a theoretical exercise. On the other hand, I was uneasy about the propensity of the narrators to cling to biological foundations, claiming to be a 'real' woman/man after undergoing gender reassignment. To my mind this reinforces the 'law of two sexes', the very system that allows for the oppression those who do not conform – be they trans or not.

While the notion of being 'an in-between person' may *theoretically* offer the radical potential to resist or challenge binary understandings of gender, in 'real life' the female/male division remains extraordinarily persistent and durable. Exceedingly dualist gender ontologies habitually prevail in ordinary life, within the worldviews of gender non-conformists and generally. Gender scholars who may accept that a binary distinction is problematic *theoretically* also tend to fall back on it in various everyday life practices. Consequently, the current two-sex system appears to be inexorable. All modern expressions of sexual and gender identity – lesbianism, homosexuality and heterosexuality – depend on it for their expression (Hird 2000). If anything, this book attests to that. However, if it can provoke thought on the topic and allow for the discussion of issues of gender and sexualities, then it is indeed useful. *Trans* will be of interest to gender scholars and those working in the area of sexualities. Though the general reader will certainly be introduced to a new vocabulary, the book is highly accessible. It will also undoubtedly be a valuable source of information and reassurance to trans people and their loved ones. It certainly is

worthwhile and interesting reading material that will hopefully generate more discussion, including commentary from African scholars.

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