

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007, 320 pp., \$US 22.95 paper (978-0-8223-3869-7), \$US 79.95 hardcover (978-0-8223-3853-6).

Imagining *Transgender* details the complex character of “transgender” at the intersection of anthropological fieldwork, epistemology, identity politics, and categories of being. From the opening pages of the book, Valentine explains the challenges of doing fieldwork in community organizations and outreach centers aimed at male-bodied or M2F persons, and which called out to members under the sign “transgender,” even though many clients using the services would themselves refuse “transgender” as an identity. From this tension, Valentine develops the rest of the book: although people are everywhere categorized and categorize others, people also refuse those categorizations even as they stand under the categorical signs for practical purposes, recognizing that at least in some provisional way the identification *does* address their needs. The point is central to the overall organization of the book, grounded as it is in his 1990s fieldwork in Manhattan drag balls, transgender street prostitution outreach groups, and at a health and education drop-in center, known as “The Clinic,” for transgendered persons.

Thus Valentine sets up the book’s interrogative goals, and explains early on that his research was challenged to take up these questions — of community, of identity (politics), and of categorization — in part because the “girls” in one of his populations categorized him as a gender normative gay man who had no business doing research on *their* lives, and *their* spaces. Trying to figure out how he and his subjects could both find a resonant belonging, albeit in radically different ways and different contexts, under the sign “gay,” while simultaneously seeking to understand the manner in which “gay” and “transgender” have come to signal distinct ways of being, motivate the explorations of the entire first section of the book. In his exploration of the overlap and disjuncture between categories of gayness and transgender Valentine quickly perceives that his work does not adequately address the concerns of the F2M or female-bodied masculine persons. Valentine does, however, discuss the manner in which events following the 1970 Second Congress to Unite Women uncoupled sexuality from gender, making it possible to speak

of the “woman-identified woman” and rejected “male-identified” (i.e., butch) female-bodied people (pp. 46–47). Though the discussion is only a side-note to his larger study, Valentine spends several pages to make the point, rightly, that separations in communities and disagreements about goals he encounters in his fieldwork, cannot be adequately understood — either for himself or his readers — without some attention to the social and political context in which groups like the Radical Lesbians worked to distinguish their goals from those of gay men, and to establish a place inside the more gender-normative power circle of larger feminist organizations. The discussion carries over briefly in Chapter Four, when Valentine takes up the issue of the Butch/FTM border wars and places them in context with the development of “Transgender Studies,” a field that he argues is far from settled, and deeply contested from within. That observation will not surprise many readers, however, his exploration of its implications for those of us who do work that intersects with or enters into Transgender Studies is epistemologically rich and provocative. Citing Giddens, Valentine notes

...academic knowledge and social practices are related in recursive ways, so that academic models of society and its subjects come to be the ground against which social action is produced. In turn such action becomes the source of anthropological and sociological data, framed as local knowledge. (p. 172).

As a reader, I would have preferred that Valentine open the book with Chapter Four, which is both a literature review, and a review of the literal field in which Valentine finds himself doing his ethnographic research. I recommend that readers perhaps begin with Chapter Four, especially if they are new to Transgender Studies. Those more familiar with the terrain will still find the epistemological and ontological discussion a useful map to the rest of Valentine’s thinking and may, therefore, also benefit from reading it first.

A book review cannot adequately parse the manner in which Valentine deepens his view of the history of transgender as either an identifying practice or a field of inquiry. It is clear that his work is committed to providing a nuanced view that pays attention to conflicts in political goals inside the pre-Stonewall gay movement, and to the internal contestation of the 19th century discourse that structured “homosexuality” as a form of gender inversion. In short, Valentine does not insist on revealing a single truth regarding transgender, but rather provides insight into the sociopolitical needs that have shaped competing truth claims regarding gender, embodiment, and desire. In Chapter Five, “The Logic of Inclusion,” for example, Valentine argues that while the privileged

theorize about issues of diversity, the protection of the recognition of (homonormative) gay populations as “legitimate” claimants remains hegemonic, and reduces the outcome of claims to recognize diversity to a simple insistence on inclusivity.

Inclusivity, Valentine argues, leaves large numbers of people ideologically unrecognized within the normate, white, middle-class politics of LGBT organizations and movements — for whom the “T” is merely a lip-service add-on. The liberty-via-spending power arguments to which the most privileged lesbian and gay groups have laid claim exacerbate policies that have seen the privatization of public space, reductions in social service support, the vilification of sex workers, and the further marginalization of already racialized persons, such as the girls of the Meat Market district. For all its claims to inclusion, then, the LGBT movement has largely left the “T” population metaphorically and materially homeless. These are bold claims on Valentine’s part, but as a reader I appreciate their importance, and welcome them as a frank discussion from the inside about the weakness of contemporary LGBT lobbying, and organizing.

Valentine’s final chapter is an exploration of the manner in which violence against transgendered persons has come to be understood as the defining feature of transgender lives. The chapter is one of the more difficult to read because it sets itself the very difficult task of arguing *for* the continued use of “transgender” in fairly uncomplicated ways in order to identify a group of people who are particularly vulnerable to experiences of violence, regardless of whether they see “transgender” as a label that accurately describes how they identify themselves (p. 205). At the same time, Valentine tries to tease out distinctions between types of violence, and whether it is really the case that work such as Valentine’s — ethnography of transgender done by a nontransgendered social scientist — constitutes a form of institutionalized violence. The chapter critically investigates the ethics of doing anthropological research; the problems involved in deciding whose claims to an experience of “violence” at the hands of another are valid, as in the confrontations between Janice Raymond and Transsexual Menace members at a 1994 reading by Raymond on new reproductive technologies; and the problems that inhere in attempts to claim the dead — as Brandon Teena has been claimed both by trans activists and by lesbian activists — when we cannot know how those persons would have identified themselves. Whether Valentine’s answers are fully satisfactory ought not to be the ground on which we determine the success of the chapter; rather, it is in the very fact that he is willing to launch the inquiry that we ought to value the work. Undoubtedly, the book will become a base from which many others will be

able to take up similar questions, and that is a significant contribution to the field.

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