

# Excursions

Volume 5, Issue 1 (December 2014) Boundaries



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Cover design: Danny Bright

Grainne O'Connell, '*Transgender Experience: Place, Ethnicity and Visibility* by David Coad and Chantal Zabus (eds.)'

Excursions, vol. 5, no. 1 (2014)

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## Reviews

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*Transgender Experience: Place, Ethnicity and Visibility* by David Coad and Chantal Zabus (eds.)  
Oxford: Routledge, 2014.

*Transgender Experience: Place, Ethnicity and Visibility* is an eclectic volume of ten essays which broadly focusses on how transgender identities and experiences are being conceptualised by both trans identified and non-trans identified scholars and artists in a diverse range of geographical contexts. The volume is mainly pitched to academic audiences and activist communities who work on transgender histories in French-speaking contexts and cultures and this is signalled in the introduction by the editors, Chantal Zabus and David Coad, who foreground how the book emerged from a 2009 bilingual (English and French) academic conference in Paris which focussed on transgender visibility. Alongside this academic framing, the editors acknowledge

the salient dynamics of the French context, especially the 2009 announcement by the French health minister that transsexuality was no longer officially ‘diagnosed’ as a mental illness in France. The specificity of this 2009 moment, and the place of transsexuality within this, is expanded on throughout the individual essays, especially in the careful attention to the differing interpretations of transsexual, transgender and gender-variant. Overall the editors in this introduction deliberately analyse theoretical academic discussions alongside broader political debates and contexts, and, as a whole, this is successful in the volume.

By describing the inception of the volume in Paris, France is presented as formative for the book’s initial conception. However, though Paris is an important context for initiating the volume, it is not the only context which is engaged with. Instead, France, and more broadly, French-speaking cultures, are utilised as contexts through which to highlight the wider relationship between academic analyses and society across different contexts, including South Africa in the final essay. A primary theme here, which is executed throughout the volume, is that the history of bridging academic and non-academic spheres has emerged from feminist, postcolonial, transgender and queer approaches both inside and outside of academia, in a diverse range of contexts. In keeping with this self-reflective approach to the relationship between research and the politics of positionality, the editors reveal that soon after the 2009 conference, they perceived a need to address the complex role of both place and ethnicity for critical understandings of transgender visibility. The subtitle – *Place, Ethnicity and Visibility* – clearly reflects the wish to address this critical gap in the 2009 conference. But the editors also reflect on how the number of transgender studies which address topics beyond Euro-American contexts are still growing and they suggest that this is where the current volume fits in. Moreover, within the introduction, and underpinning these wider acknowledgements, is a wish to move away from the pathologising approach to transgender histories and identities inherited via Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. The latter approaches have heavily shaped dominant narratives surrounding transgender histories and this volume convincingly writes back to the pathologising narratives of many Freudian and Lacanian approaches without rejecting psychoanalytical traditions outright.

The structure of the book is mapped into three parts which follow the subtitle of the book; part one is 'place'; part two is 'ethnicity'; and part three is 'visibility'. Given the difficulty of organising essay collections, the three part structure allows the essays in each section to broadly cohere, though there is the question of why to focus on specific cultural contexts versus these broad themes. In the first section, which contains three essays, the authors reflect on their own experiences, and understandings, of being transgender in French-speaking cultures. The aim here is to stress the complex subjectivities and experiences of transgender history and people. The first essay, 'On the History of Transsexuals in France' by Maxime Foerster introduces a reader to the wider history of transsexuals in Paris and focusses specifically on the importance of the Paris Cabaret scene in the 1950s and 1960s in creating a space where transsexuals could organise and consolidate a group identity. Foerster's essay provides a much-needed analysis of histories of transsexuals in France given the relative lack of attention to them as opposed to British and American histories. In this essay, he traces the emergence of a vibrant transgender and transsexual culture in Paris during the mid-twentieth century. A central focus of this essay is the active dialogue between activists and academics in French transgender history which initiates a discussion of how specific historical trajectories have shaped what we now read as French transgender history. The author also reflects on how to place himself in relation to transgender history given the vibrancy of the culture that has come before him. Indeed, reading the essay immediately following Foerster's makes his essay read as even more vibrant given the subtle contrasts between that essay and Foerster's.

The second essay, 'Marie, Because it is Beautiful' by Marie-Pierre Pruvot (Bambi), is an autobiographical account of the author's childhood in 1940s Algeria. This is a poignant and moving story, and the Second World War frames the relationship between the author as a child and the familial context. The author of this essay is a prominent subject of the first essay. Thus, there is a deliberate dialogue taking place between the authors in the book, which begins to explore how the French empire, and specifically the relationship between France and colonial Algeria in the 1940s, informs the backdrop to both of these essays.

The third essay, 'My Sex is in My Head' by Ludwig Trovato, like the previous two, presents an approach which engages with the lived experience of transgender people. While also following in the vein of the previous two essays, Trovato gives an autobiographical account of his experiences as a transgender person. Trovato's experiences are marked as especially important because of how Trovato, in his own words, is often read as someone who is 'other' in both LGBTQI communities and broader society. The entire essay is a complex, and self-consciously, shifting account of identity, the body and the dynamics of desire. The title of the essay—'My Sex is in My Head'—neatly foregrounds how Trovato sees himself as transgender, which his identity constantly in motion. This is echoed in the final lines of the essay where Trovato reflects on how he sees 'the genitals as a metaphor for the heart' (p.48). Trovato is keen to stress how he sees his role as a film-maker as a neat articulation of how he sees his identity and he ends the essay with the idea of this as a 'moving image': '[m]y genitals, my sex, would therefore be an image. But a moving image, mobile, in a world that is so often immobile' (p.48). Trovato's focus on fluidity reads as a more obviously self-conscious positioning in contrast to the other essays, but he is keenly aware of how positionality is as much about the dynamics behind fluidity.

Part two, entitled 'Ethnicity', begins with 'Studs, Stems and Fishy Boys: Adolescent Latino Gender Variance and the Slippery Diagnosis of Transsexuality' by Vernon A. Rosario. This essay focusses on the life experiences of gender-variant Latino adolescents in Los Angeles and the author deliberately utilises gender-variant as a term which he understands as different to transsexual. A central premise is how most medical literatures on transsexuality have focussed on white, middle-class male-to-female (MTF) transsexual people and that, in the accounts which do describe transsexual people who are not white and/or middle-class, there has been very little focus on adolescents. Rosario's essay reveals how gender-variant adolescents in Los Angeles understand and experience their identities as both dynamic, and therefore subject to change, and also locally specific to Los Angeles. For Rosario, these adolescents' experiences are crucially inflected by ethnicity, class and gender and Rosario concludes this section by stressing how his research participants clearly reflect the dynamic model of gender identity formation. The latter recognition is crucial when challenging how some people would rather 'fit' transsexual people into

the idea of 'gender dysphoria' as outlined in the DSM criteria, and Rosario is especially critical of the detrimental effects of DSM criteria for gender-variant youth.

The final essay in part two is entitled '*Kaming Mga Talyada (We Who Are Sexy): The Transsexual Whiteness of Christine Jorgensen in the (Post) Colonial Philippines*' by Susan Stryker. Stryker contextualises the wider emergence of "transgender" as a term which has become synonymous with a form of whiteness, often akin to western imperialism. She argues that the coding of the term "transgender" as white and western reflects the dominance of imperial trajectories. The imperial power in the Philippines is the U.S., but Stryker argues that the identification of the term "transgender" as white, western and an agent of U.S. imperialism is far too reductive. She relates this to an analysis of the 1962 film *Kaming Mga Talyada (We Who Are Sexy)*, which was produced by one of the major studios in the Philippines and which featured the U.S. transsexual celebrity Christine Jorgensen. Stryker's central thesis focusses on the complex reading of Jorgensen in the specific cultural context of Manila in the Philippines, where Jorgensen's whiteness is clearly a salient part of how Jorgensen is read. According to Stryker, the longer history of gender identities in the Philippines cannot be reduced to the history of imperialism. Many postcolonial critics, such as Gayatri Spivak, would recognise this critique. But, at the same time, the salience of whiteness as an ideology beyond the idea of skin colour is not addressed here in this essay. This raises the question of to what extent transsexual figures, such as Jorgensen, can ever be read as separate from forms of imperialism, even with Stryker's sympathetic reading in mind.

The final section in the book, entitled 'Visibility', contains five essays and begins with 'Claiming Space: Transgender Visibility in the Arts' by Eveline Kilian. Kilian explores the potential of art to provide the space within which to express transgender identities and experiences. Art is not simply an expression of socio-political contexts, Kilian argues, although it is obviously informed by these contexts. Her choice of texts is wide-ranging but all, such as Brigid Brophy's 1969 novel *In Transit*, challenge the idea of the gender binary. Kilian also self-consciously examines the complex, and contested, relationship between queer studies and transgender studies. The latter is

highly important and is a relatively ignored point of discussion in many academic contexts and Kilian concludes by affirming that art can facilitate this discussion, as well as providing a space for alternative models of the gendered self.

The next essay in this section is entitled 'Transsexual Experience: Photography, Gender, and the case of the Emperor's New Clothes' by Sara Davidmann. This focusses on a series of collaborative photographs taken by Davidmann with four trans people in London and Sheffield. The author begins by presenting the history of photography and its relationship to trans people before Davidmann's examination of the different photographs. The conclusion to this essay reveals that the photographic subjects, and the understanding of their own gender identities, are not captured by gender dichotomies. Rather, each subject negotiates the complex divide between the private and public sphere and the dominant gendered perceptions of the wider public in London and Sheffield.

David Coad's 'The Politics of Home in *Becoming Julia*: Transsexual Experience of Australia' analyses the choices made by Ruth Cullen, the director of the 2003 film *Becoming Julia*, in which Cullen collaborated with a transsexual person living in Sydney. Coad argues that Cullen's portrayal of Julia, the main protagonist in the film, desexualizes the character and reflects a problematic positioning of the transsexual as destined to be undesired by wider society. Key to the essay is the contested relationship between feminism and male to female transsexual people, and Coad ultimately problematizes how Cullen silences the more complex threads of Julia's relationship to gender and sexual desire. Like Kilian, Coad provides a much needed theoretical exploration of a wider discussion between feminism and transsexual experience.

John C. Hawley's 'Trans Autobiographies as Performative Utterances' analyses the mixed reception of transsexual and transgender autobiographies in the U.S. He focusses on the distinct comparisons between gay and lesbian autobiographies and transsexual and transgender autobiographies. Hawley's essay captures a wide range of nuanced histories. It ends with the idea that autobiography allows individuals to reflect their changing senses of self, and argues that this is embedded in a

presentation of how history is also changing. This, he argues, is a major point of resonance between transgender, LGBT and genderqueer communities.

‘Trans Africa: Between Transgender “Possession” and Transsexuality in South African Experiential Narratives’ by Chantal Zabus. Zabus discusses two South African texts which, broadly speaking, explore the shift from transgender to transsexualism. Specifically Zabus looks at FTMs who, she notes, are statistically less researched across all contexts, including South Africa, by comparison to MTFs. This reads as a more intricate essay than the previous ones as Zabus examines the tension between the history of pan-African word usage, or the circulation of terms across different African contexts and not just within South Africa, and the European terms imported via colonialism. The author is keen to stress that some of this tension has to do with the fact that translation is never fully complete. But Zabus also stresses that the blurring of fiction and autobiography in South Africa since the 1960s and 1970s has provided a historical precedent for current approaches to transgender theory in South Africa. To illustrate this, Zabus discusses Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde’s *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma* as a text which creates a new genre of trans South African writing while also negotiating the complex moment of the 1994 post-apartheid period. To my mind, Zabus concludes by suggesting that her chosen texts are in dialogue with the emerging recognition of transgender visibility in South Africa; this recognition is both about wider rights within South African and about a history which is not willingly reducible to universal ideas of transgender identities. This ending is important given the lack of attention to contextual histories outside of the global north.

The ten essays in this collection all engage with the expanding field of transgender studies beyond Anglo-American contexts and the global north. This volume is a valuable contribution to a field which is both broadening its past remit whilst also intersecting with fields, such as postcolonial studies, which are central to how it might envisage and theorise transgender experiences in the future. Though the volume does not provide a specific map of what this future will look like, Zabus’ conclusion pushes the dominant focus of transgender studies beyond global north



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contexts while also engaging with the complex readings of transgender histories in a South African context.