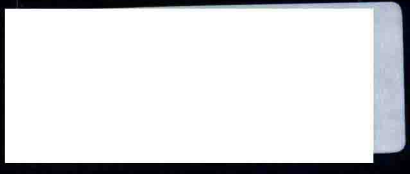
ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN CULTURAL AND MEDIA STUDIES

Transgender Experience

Place, Ethnicity, and Visibility

Edited by

[redacted]ntal Zabus and David Coad



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Transgender Experience

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Transgender Experience

This collection by trans and nontrans academics and artists from the United States, the UK, and continental Europe examines how transgenderism can be conceptualized in a literary, biographical, and autobiographical framework, with emphasis on place, ethnicity, and visibility. The volume covers the 1950s to the present day and examines autobiographical accounts, films featuring various stages of transitioning, as well as interviews with trans people.

"This lively addition to trans studies crosses diverse geographical and gender boundaries, forging important connections between personal narratives and theoretical claims."

—*Patricia Elliot, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada*

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David Coad is associate professor of English and cultural studies at the University of Valenciennes, France. He is the author of *Prophète dans le désert: Essais sur Patrick White* (1997), *Gender Trouble Down Under: Australian Masculinities* (2002) and *The Metrosexual: Gender, Sexuality, and Sport* (2008).

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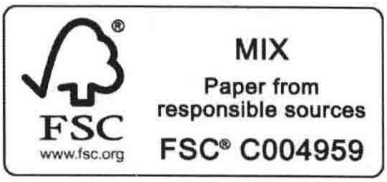

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Introduction

Chantal Zabus and David Coad

In 2009 trans and nontrans scholars explored transgender visibility at an international bilingual conference organized by the editors that took place in Paris. It was titled "Transgenres: Nouvelles Identités et Visibilités/ Transgenderism, New Identities and Visibilities." And the results were extremely fruitful. However, in continued investigation of the topic of transgender visibility after the conference, it became clear that two other focal points equally needed attention: the idea of place and ethnicity. Representing this expansion, the present volume approaches transgender experience from three different angles, taking into account the pertinence of place, ethnicity, and visibility.

The relevance of place may be seen quite simply in the fact that the conference was the first of its kind in France, where both editors are based. Place became an issue of capital importance given the timing of the 2009 conference and the specific French political context. Due to an announcement by Roselyne Bachelot, the French minister of health and sports, on 16 May 2009, suddenly transgenderism became extremely visible in the media. That day, the minister declared that transsexuality would no longer be considered a mental illness. National and international media reacted to this ministerial decision suggesting that France was the first country to depathologize and destigmatize transsexuality so openly.

The irony of a *French* initiative intended to depathologize transsexuality was forgotten in the fervor to relay the announcement. Ever since Jacques Lacan, the father of French psychoanalysis, declared in a 1971 seminar that transsexuals confuse the sexual organ with the signifier, a generation of psychoanalysts and psychiatrists beginning with Catherine Millot, the author of *Horsexe* (1983; translated into English in 1991), produced a series of texts arguing that transsexuals were in fact very ill.[1] Turning its back on this tradition of interpreting transsexuality as a psychological illness, France was now leading the world in the attempt to normalize transsexuals and transsexuality.

The Paris conference on transgenderism also took place in a particular international context of consolidating transgender studies as an academic discipline. It thereby helped put France on the map of international conferences addressing the subject of gender variance. The conference in France

was organized soon after the TransRhetorics interdisciplinary conference held at Cornell University, United States, in March 2009 and concurrently with the International Symposium on Trans Cinema Studies at the University of Amsterdam in May 2009. There quickly followed a number of conferences organized worldwide that explicitly focused on transgender themes such as the Trans Rights conference at Malta in October 2009, organized by ILGA Europe (Equality for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex People in Europe), the Transgender Studies and Theories—Building up the Field in a Nordic Context international conference hosted at Linköping University, Sweden, in November 2009, and the (Re)Figuring Sex: Somatechnical (Re)Visions conference at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia, in November 2009. France, which had lagged behind other countries in accepting transgender studies as a legitimate academic discipline, thus became part of a worldwide network of scholars working together to promote the visibility and normalization of gender variance.

Choosing one place, France, as the focus of Part One, allows the reader to see some of the specificities of gender variance in one particular location. *Transgender Experience* follows a recent preoccupation of concentrating on a geographic location and exploring the different national and sexual economies of that location. Other studies that fall into this frame of reference include *Genders, Transgenders, and Sexualities in Japan* (2005), edited by McLelland and Dasgupta; the transgender-themed issue of *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* (2006); Peter A. Jackson's work on Thai genders and sexualities; Vek Lewis's book *Crossing Sex and Gender in Latin America* (2010); and Howard Chiang's edited volume *Transgender China* (2012).

As gender-variant social practices and technologies occur across diverse geographical locations, an analysis of place led to a widening of focus in order to examine the transnational and different ethnicities in one particular nation and across nations. How transgenderism in one country differs from transgenderism in another country is increasingly engaging the attention of scholars who work in the field of transgenderism. Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura assert in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* (*TSR2*) (2013) that "the field of transgender studies is moving strongly in transnational directions" (8). *Transgender Experience* demonstrates the pertinence of this remark by investigating locations that have not yet been the subject of intensive critical attention in the field of transgender studies, namely Australia and South Africa. *The Transgender Studies Reader* (2006), edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, tackled non-Western societies on only one occasion (Hok-Sze Leung on Hong Kong cinema). Trystan Cotten's *Transgender Migrations* (2011) widened the geographic parameters of work on transgenderism by devoting one chapter to Berlin and another to northern Mexican border towns. *TSR 2* continues this tendency to move in an international direction as five of its fifty essays treat non-Euro-American societies.

An aspect of transgender studies that has come to increasingly occupy the attention of researchers is the desire to map the intersections between

transgenderism and ethnicity in or outside the United States. Linking these two elements in the past has principally led to studies of an ethnographic or anthropological nature.[2] There have been fewer attempts to address these factors together from theoretical perspectives that are associated with other disciplines. In Part Two, psychiatry and somatechnics are the fields drawn upon in order to address ethnicity and show how it impacts on transgenderism.

Whatever the place, or the country, the necessity to increase the visibility of transgender experience remains a common goal globally. This objective lies behind the International Transgender Day of Visibility. Since 2009, this day, 17 May, has been an opportunity for transgender rights' activists to work together and promote the interests of gender-variant people. Apart from actively supporting this international day, another principal means of promoting transgender subjectivities is through literary, experiential, and cultural production. Part Three, therefore, shows how autobiographies, photography, film documentaries, autobiographical novels, and literary texts allow for the expression of transgender identities. More importantly, these forms help to promote the visibility of what Viviane Namaste a decade ago called "invisible lives." In her book of that title, Namaste claimed that "English-language scholarship on transsexual and transgendered people is severely limited to the extent that it does not account for how these individuals situate themselves in the everyday social world" (51). The cultural production examined here, reflecting transsexual experience in U.S., British, African, and Australian cultures, invites readers and spectators to imagine or see images of gender variance in the hope that it will become increasingly intelligible, rather than be ostracized to the margins of comprehension due to epistemic blindness.

PLACE

One of the specificities of French transgenderism is the impact of 30 years of transphobic discourse from members of the psychiatric profession and other medical experts. However, this negative appreciation of transgenderism started to undergo a major change at the end of the 1990s. Since 1998, the queer theorist, trans rights activist, and sociologist Marie-Hélène Bourcier, drawing on Anglo-American theories of gender and sexuality, has analyzed transsexuality in France in a refreshingly new and informed manner.[3] In "Zap la psy," the final chapter of *Sexpolitiques*, Bourcier denounces the transphobic and heterocentric pseudoscientific discourse of Lacanian psychiatrists that has plagued the country for decades. Now, members of the medical profession are attenuating this hitherto transphobic discourse by publishing accounts destined to help the general public understand transsexuality without pathologizing it.[4] As well, the publication of texts in the last 5 years by a small number of other French scholars, some of whom are

transgendered, has helped reclaim transsexuality from the fields of Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalysis.[5] The translation of Patrick Califia's influential work *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism* (1997), published in 2003 under the title *Le Mouvement transgenre: Changer de sexe*, was a step in this new direction of trying to understand transgenderism rather than condemning it.

Maxime Foerster set about writing the first history of transsexuality in France after being inspired by *How Sex Changed* (2002), Joanne Meyerowitz's history of transsexuality in the United States. Part One opens with the author's summary of the French version of this history. This is followed by some personal thoughts about Foerster's own gender identity. An important counterpoint to the long history of medicalized expertise in France on the subject of transsexuality has been the large number of transsexual autobiographies that have appeared in the country since the 1970s. Rather than have their lives investigated by at times unsympathetic and biased representatives of the psychiatric establishment, some transsexuals have provided their own testimonies by relating their personal experience of being transgendered. Two of these authors are represented in Part One: Marie-Pierre Pruvot, known more familiarly by her stage name Bambi, the most famous living male-to-female (hereafter MTF) transsexual in France, and the female-to-male (hereafter FTM) transsexual Ludwig Trovato, who became embroiled in the French judicial system from 1999 to 2002 after being unjustly accused of sexual offences with a minor. Bambi has authorized an excerpt from her autobiography, published in 2007, to be translated into English. In a previously unpublished article that has likewise been translated, Trovato refers to his two trials in the context of a wider discussion of sexual identity, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

Although they are not featured in this volume, trans scholars, artists, and activists Maud-Yeuse Thomas, Tom Reucher, Vincent Avrons, Carine Boeuf, Vincent He-Say, and Vincent Guillot,[6] some of whom were guests at the 2009 Paris conference, voice concerns similar to those in Trovato's chapter in the film documentary *L'Ordre des mots* ("Binding Words," 2007).[7] Their encounters with French psychoanalysts, surgeons, and endocrinologists, who regulated their lives through medical protocols and restrictive nosographies or left them with no other option than to undergo surgery in countries such as Belgium, allowed them to achieve a sense of identity and self-realization. Avrons is "proud of [the] scars" resulting from his mastectomy and is content with being "a man without a penis." MTF Thomas calls herself "intergender" and "multiply androgynous"; she thinks of her "neovagina" as a "mnemonic trick" that reinforces her status as a transwoman. The search for an adequate vocabulary to express an alternative identity is particularly personalized in He-Say's self-designation as FTU (Female to Unknown). Unlike Trovato, however, the trans people portrayed in *L'Ordre des mots* all practice a form of activism and are famous for their sensational "zapping" techniques, which have given an accrued visibility to the French trans community.[8]

Foerster begins his account of the history of transsexuality in France by referring to New York where, in 2012, the International Center of Photography held an exhibition of photographs taken in Paris in the early 1960s by the Swede Christer Strömholm. The photographs feature transgendered women, known at the time as *transformistes*, who lived in Paris near Pigalle.[9] Visitors to the exhibition would have found an invaluable visual reminder of a subculture working in Parisian cabarets as entertainers in the mid-twentieth century. Strömholm was interested in portraying intimacy between friends. For example, couples are shown half naked in hotel rooms. He is also intent on pointing out the agency of these women. In the Introduction to the book he writes, "This is a book about the quest for self-identity, about the right to live, about the right to own and control one's body" (Strömholm, n.pag.).

In "On the History of Transsexuals in France," Foerster provides English-speaking readers with the cultural background necessary to contextualize the transsexuals who were photographed by Strömholm.[10] Foerster highlights two of the most well-known French transsexuals who gained international celebrity during and after their experience as Parisian cabaret artistes in the 1950s and 1960s. One of these women is Jacqueline-Charlotte Dufreynoy (1931–2006), who assumed the stage name Coccinelle. The other is Marie-Pierre Pruvot (b. 1935), mentioned previously.

Julia Serano, in *Whipping Girl* (2007), a study of sexism, femininity, and transsexuality, argues that some feminists dismiss transwomen because they are perceived as resorting to hyperfeminization, hypersexualization, and objectification (16). However, in the cases of Coccinelle, Bambi, and their transgendered contemporaries, such eroticization allowed them to finance their sex-reassignment surgeries and display their bodies with pride at home and abroad, thereby achieving a sense of self-affirmation in their acquired sex and gender. This spectacularization of transsexual bodies is a particularity of the history of transsexuality in French-speaking cultures. A similar transsexual cabaret culture in Canada has been examined by Viviane Namaste in *C'était du spectacle! L'histoire des artistes transsexuelles à Montréal 1955–1985*. Foerster demonstrates the positive benefits of the commercialization and commodification of trans bodies at a particular time in history. A transsexual community formed itself around the cabaret circuit, captured by Strömholm in his Place Blanche photographs, which proved to be valuable for its members. Foerster also examines the sense of community between transsexuals in France in the late 1970s and 1980s by analyzing the pioneering work of a Belgian pastor, before considering how his own work on transsexuality and his friendship with Bambi have forced him to ask himself questions about whether he might one day begin a transgendered trajectory.

The text by Bambi presented in this volume is the beginning of "Restless Childhood," the first chapter of her autobiography, *Marie parce que c'est joli* (2007). The term "autobiography" is questioned by the author because

the book is described on the title page as a novelistic biography. Literary genre and gender (the word *genre* is used to describe both in French) are thus blurred. *Marie parce que c'est joli* recounts events in Bambi's life that took place between 1940 and 2001. The excerpt describing the life of Bambi in colonial Algeria, from the time she was four-and-a-half-years old until she first attended school, is centered round the theme of childhood emotional restlessness. This anxiety is the result of the masculine gender role Bambi was expected to fulfill as a young child given that she was assigned a male sex at birth. A comparable account of childhood gender anxiety can be found in the opening chapter of Jan Morris's *Conundrum* (1974; rpt. 2004) where the author recounts an episode that took place under her mother's piano at the age of three or four: "I realized that I had been born into the wrong body, and should really be a girl" (1). Similarly, Bambi writes in this excerpt, "I had the impression that a mistake had slipped in somewhere."

In the late 1980s Sandy Stone had lamented that neither theoretical investigators nor transsexuals had taken the step of problematizing the "wrong body": "under the binary phallocratic founding myth by which Western bodies and subjects are authorized, only one body per gendered subject is 'right.' All other bodies are wrong" (297). The "wrong body" trope became so recurrent that it was popularized in the BBC series *The Wrong Body*, broadcast in 1995. It featured Fredd, who was assigned female at birth and claimed that she was really a male.

In *Second Skins*, a text that is imbued with Didier Anzieu's theories about the layered "skin-egos" that make up identity through self-reflection (Anzieu 47), Jay Prosser points out that mirror scenes are a common trope in transsexual autobiographies (100). Bambi's writings support this idea. The restlessness or anxiety of the young Bambi is lessened when she dons her elder sister's hand-me-down dress and rejoices in the mirror-image that reveals her "true self." In a section of her autobiography not included in this volume, she refers to this self as "*la jeune fille qui avait toujours existé en moi*" ("the young girl that had always existed in me") (*Marie*, 24). The importance of mirror scenes for Bambi is reiterated on the first page of her novel *J'inventais ma vie* where we read, "*Je vois ma véritable image dans le miroir*" ("I see my true image in the mirror") and "*Je scrute le miroir: image triomphante de moi*" ("I look at the mirror closely: triumphant image of myself") (9). The image reflected by the mirror shows Bambi what she terms the "true essence or my very being," that is, her female sex and femininity. Later in her life, Bambi found fulfillment when surrounded by an audience who mirrored her sense of self: the clients of the nightclubs in Paris in the 1950s and 1960s or her pupils at Parisian high schools where she taught French for over 25 years.

The title of Trovato's contribution, "My Sex Is in My Head," recalls Julia Serano's explanation of the term "subconscious sex." Serano defines subconscious sex as "the gender we subconsciously feel ourselves to be" (78), that is, male or female, and further explains that it refers to what a