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► **To cite this version:**

Olga L Gonzalez. Review of "The Myth of the Wrong Body" (A la conquista del cuerpo equivocado),, Author: Miquel Miss,é Editorial Egales. La vie des idées, 2019. hal-02164181

HAL Id: hal-02164181

<https://hal.science/hal-02164181>

Submitted on 24 Jun 2019

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The Myth of the Wrong Body

About: Miquel Missé, *A la conquista del cuerpo equivocado*, Editorial Egales

Olga L. González

Challenging the essentialist conception of transgendered people as “born in the wrong body,” Miquel Missé proposes a sociology of the body that emphasizes the burden of social norms.

Miquel Missé is an activist and sociologist who is well known in Spanish LGBT circles due to his participation in debates relating to transgendered people. He has been involved in various political groups, such as Guerrilla Travolak¹ and TransBlock,² and he was a leader of the international campaign “Strop Trans Pathologization 2012.” Since 2008, he has been one of the driving forces in Espai Trans, a pillar of Barcelona’s trans community. He has published several works, including, *Políticas trans. Una antología de textos desde los estudios trans norteamericanos* (Trans Policies: An Anthology of Texts from North American Trans Studies; Ed. Egales, 2015), written with Pol Galofre.

The book’s starting point is the author’s malaise as a trans man: “I have the strange feeling that my body was stolen from me ... that we, trans people, have been dispossessed of our bodies.”³ (p. 11). The book is an analysis of this malaise, and an indictment of essentialism as it relates to trans identity. Missé is conscious of the fact that his claims run counter to dominant discourses and that some will be shocked: “It is very probable that some

¹ A “non identitarian group for debate and political action” that was active in Barcelona in the late 2000s. Website: <http://guerrilla-travolaka.blogspot.com/>

² A group that emerged from Guerrilla Travolaka that was active in Barcelona in the 2010s. We come from spaces that are feminist, transfagdyke, squats, anti-capitalist, antipsychiatry, artistic, and performative.” Website: <https://transblock.wordpress.com/manifiesto-2/>.

³ « Siento la extraña sensación de que me han robado el cuerpo (...) que nos lo han arrebatado a las personas trans en general »

people will not appreciate certain ideas found in this book.”⁴ (p. 165). Even if his claims are in the minority, it is important to listen to his voice, which is both engaged and reflective.

His malaise might seem paradoxical: after years of bitter struggle, trans people have obtained many rights that have significantly altered their circumstances. These include changes in their relationships with psychiatrists (the withdrawal of “non-conformity with one’s gender” from the list of mental illnesses, which psychiatrists “healed” by proposing sex changes) and possibilities of making modifications in government records (in France, for example, modifications to one’s gender identity in government records—*état civil*—no longer require a medical protocol; in Australia, gender is no longer mentioned on passports).

At another level, transgender people have become visible in the public realm. Trans are present in the entertainment industry (in many film and TV series productions), in publishing (in a large number of works of fiction and non-fiction), in the arts (in France, the 2018 Avignon Theater Festival was devoted to gender and trans-identity), and in the media (news about demands made by trans people are widely reported). Meanwhile, some transgender figures have acquired global reputations, such as Caitlyn Jenner, Chelsea Manning, and Laverne Cox.

Scholars, too, have begun to explore this subject. Suffice it to say that people who are directly concerned (such as Stryker, 2017; Halberstam, 2017; Espineira et al, 2014) as well as cisgender scholars⁵ (including Macé, 2010; Absi, 2017; Gonzalez, 2019) have worked on this question.

For a Sociology of the Trans

The dominant narrative for explaining transgender identities and transsexuality is based on the idea that people are born into bodies that do not correspond to their inner experience: this is the idea of the “wrong body”. For Missé, this narrative is misguided. He observes: “ideas about the wrong body are still around, they have not left the stage: they have transformed themselves, they have been reinvented, and they have returned to stay”⁶ (p 17).

This book retraces the idea of the “wrong body” and denounces those responsible for spreading this idea. According to Missé, the causes are the medical paradigm, the stories of trans people themselves, and some doctors’ search for profit. This leads to an effort to build,

⁴ « Es muy probable que alguna gente se enfade con algunas de las ideas de este libro ».

⁵ “Cisgender,” in contrast to “transgender,” refers to people whose socially recognized gender agrees with their birth gender.

⁶ « Las ideas sobre el cuerpo equivocado estaban allí, no se habían ido nunca : se habían transformado, se habían reinventado, habían vuelto para quedarse ».

on non-essentialist bases that are neither biological nor premised on innateness, a different story of trans identity.

By establishing a psychiatric diagnosis (i.e., trouble in one's gender identity) and particularly by proposing a solution (modifying one's body), psychiatrists and doctors have made it difficult to overcome malaise about one's own body in another way. Trans people are, in this way, deprived of responsibility. Consequently, the "natural" response seems to be the path proposed by the medical paradigm: hormones and operations. According to Missé, the narrative of the "wrong body" has another shortcoming: it prevents one from acknowledging the burden of social norms. Recourse to a sociological analysis is, he notes, very unpopular in trans milieus.

The medical market, and in particular plastic surgery, has found in this milieu a niche that is easy to exploit. In Spain, sex reassignment surgery has been reimbursed by social security since 2008, and wait lists are long. Trans people have been turning towards private doctors and spending large amounts of money on ideal bodies—which, of course, do not exist. Moreover, surgeons have become "experts" and are presented on television as trans people's redeemers, even as they prescribe a particular way of living trans-identity. Missé recalls that the operation catalogue for trans women is extensive (vaginoplasty, feminization of the face and other parts of the body), far more than the equivalent for trans men.

Could it be because we live in a sexist society, which imposes on women's bodies demands that are impossible to achieve?⁷ (p. 39).

Against Essentialism

As one sees, this framework upsets the usual way of approaching the question. For Missé, gender behavior is predefined socially, for trans as well as for non-trans people. It has become urgent to build an alternative narrative to the reigning essentialism:

The question that must be asked is not why do people not identify with the gender of their biological sex?; but why do people, whatever body they are born into, identify with a particular gender?⁸ (p. 43)

Gender identity is a process; it is socially constructed. Gender roles are first learned in early childhood. For many people, there is no choice and this learning process involves searching for the ideal of the perfect masculine man or the perfection feminine woman. Yet in

⁷ « ¿Tendrá esto que ver con que vivimos en una sociedad sexista que señala constantemente con exigencias imposibles el cuerpo de las mujeres? »

⁸ « La pregunta que me parece que nos tenemos que plantear no es tanto qué hace que una persona no se identifique con el género que concuerda con su sexo biológico, sino qué hace que una persona nazca en el cuerpo en el que nazca se identifique con un género. »

fact, Missé emphasizes, no one achieves this goal. The trajectory that leads people to become trans is shaped by gender rigidity: if the only two models are the masculine man and the feminine woman, any difficulties faced while automatically living one's "natural" model leads to choosing the other model. This choice is one way of adapting to gender malaise, but it is not the only possible choice. The other forms Missé mentions include feminine men and masculine women. Focusing on trans people and attributing to them specific paths prevents recognition of the ways in which their trajectories are traversed—like everyone's—by the rigidity of gender norms.

This way of seeing things means debating with the trans community, where essentialist and hegemonic arguments are often reproduced. Missé describes the ways in which activists in Barcelona (which have significant exchanges with those in France) have experienced these debates. He discusses the internal divisions, but also the work of his own political and artistic group.

Another debate that he cares a great deal about concerns trans minors. After modifications to the legislation relating to sex changes, which are now possible in several countries in the Americas and Europe, the question of transgender children has emerged. In dominant medical discourse, children engaging in gender behavior that does not correspond with that of their sex are considered trans. They may be offered treatments such as puberty blockers, which can delay the appearance of sexual characteristics in adolescence (and in some countries, they are allowed to change their sex in official documents and have sex reassignment surgery).

Missé worries about essentialist discourses based on biology: these experts, when interviewed by the media, speak, for instance, of "masculine brains" in women's bodies. They are also deterministic: rather than allowing the exploration of gender identity during one's youth or adult life, the parameters are set at a very young age. Missé, who himself underwent transition as a minor, views these measures with a critical eye. He notes that these procedures are often irreversible and that they were first conceived for adults. He rebels against the dominant view that the only option for children who do not want to follow socially imposed gender norms is to become trans. He recognizes, moreover, that criticizing essential discourses and medical narratives can be seen as "transphobic," a charge that tends to bring discussion to a halt—though, since Missé is trans himself, he knows he is less exposed to this charge.

The "trans paradigm" that regulates the life of minors also underpins another problem, that of the trans body. According to this paradigm, one must have a body that is not suspect of being trans, a body that corresponds to gender binarity (which the community refers to as being good at "passing"). Thus if minors with non-conforming gender behavior and who are diagnosed as trans are offered puberty blockers, it is to prevent them from later being seen as trans in public. Missé is aware of the difficulty of living in society as a visible trans person—that is, by breaking with the binary rules of gender, in which men and women are clearly

identified as such. Yet he is opposed to this kind of marginalization, precisely because it marginalizes particular bodies, namely those that are ambiguous from a gender standpoint. He warns against unreasonable expectations about bodies:

Changing one's body is not everything, it does not solve every malaise, and it does not lead to a new life ... The body is the place where the malaise expresses itself, but it is not the source of the trans malaise.⁹ (p. 118).

The goal of this book, written by a man who underwent his transition in the 2000s, is to reconcile us with our bodies and denounce “body thieves.” It is motivated by the course of the debate concerning children who do not conform with gender rules, and it vigorously challenges the essentialist assumptions of debates relating to the trans question. It is not a strictly academic essay, but it is very familiar with the specialized literature and political debates. The book does not follow the majority opinion on these questions. Indeed, as Rogers Brubaker (2017) observes, whereas for half a century gender and sex were seen as separate from one another, we are witnessing a return of essentialist demands and, even more importantly, of an essentialist “objectivity” based in science. Through an approach that is sensitive to social constructs, Missé's book is an invitation, drawing on the social sciences and the contributions of feminist theory, to deepen our knowledge of these issues.

Reviewed: Miquel Missé, *A la conquista del cuerpo equivocado* (Conquering the Wrong Body), 172 p. Editorial Egales, Barcelona, 2018.

Further reading:

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- Brubaker, Rogers, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*, 2017, Princeton University Press, 256 p.
- González, Olga L, “L'imbrication classe et sexe à l'œuvre: parcours identitaires et migratoires chez les personnes trans MtF latino-américaines,” *Genre, sexualité et société*, no. 20, 2019.
- Macé, Éric, “Ce que les normes de genre font aux corps / Ce que les corps trans font aux normes de genre,” *Sociologie* vol 1, no. 4, p. 497-515, 2010.

⁹ « El cambio corporal no lo es todo, no resuelve todos los malestares, no otorga una nueva vida (...) El cuerpo es el lugar en el que se expresa el malestar, pero no es la fuente del malestar trans ».

First published by laviedesidees.fr, 2 February 2019.
Translated from the French by Michael Behrent.
Published in booksandideas.net, 15 April 2019.