

PLEMONS, ERIC. *The look of a woman: facial feminization surgery and the aims of trans- medicine*. xi, 192 pp., bibliogr. Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2017. \$23.95 (paper)

How does facial feminization surgery (FFS) work? This question is far from merely a technical one. The operation's success is judged not by the patient or surgeon, but by the reactions its effects elicit in others. It aims to help the transitioning person obtain social recognition as a woman. Hence, understanding FFS requires apprehending a much broader structure: the one that enables the materialization of femininity in our society. To tackle this problem, Eric Plemons conducted fieldwork between 2010 and 2011 within the surgery of Douglas Ousterhout, one of the first and most influential American surgeons in this field.

In line with texts of medical anthropology such as Annemarie Mol's *The body multiple* (2002), the author sets out to unwrap the layers of signification that both underlie and emerge from medical practices – in this case, regarding trans therapeutics. Observing the historical evolutions in trans patients' concerns that took place between the 1950s and 1980s – where the emphasis has shifted from sexual reassignment surgery to a more global approach questioning the relevant gender markers as seen in the body – Plemons hypothesizes that the growing success of FFS within the trans community is a sign of a change in the social understanding of sex. In brief, he analyses the practices of changing sex in order to shed light on the nature of sex itself. The fact that surgery is less focused on genitals and more on faces points to a practical acknowledgement that sex is, fundamentally, a social identity. Therefore, sex is no longer an essential property of one's body, but the product of an ongoing process of social recognition and interactions.

Nevertheless, these medical evolutions go hand-in-hand with theoretical ones. To that end, Plemons relies on a precise analysis of Judith Butler's work, and, more generally, on the academic literature that dislocated the definitions of sex and gender, queried their interconnection, and then made possible new ways of thinking and living them. Nourished by various philosophical works, such as Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Honneth on

recognition, or Austin's and Derrida's linguistic doctrines, he offers a reflection upon what constitutes a gender identity, through the lens of the one embodied by trans women. The stories of transformations that take place in the operating room lead him to reflect upon the reality of bodies being less the result of any given materiality, and more the product of a never-ending materialization, which finds its meaning within a determined social context.

One of the greatest strengths of this book is to show how theories and facts are always intertwined. Plemons both demonstrates that this is true in the field of medical practice and exemplifies it in his own writing. Each chapter beautifully combines detailed observations from his fieldwork with surgeons and trans women with analysis nourished by medical anthropology, queer theory, and trans literature. In this regard he offers the reader a very nuanced monograph that reflects the actual coexistence of multiple theories and practices regarding trans therapeutics, a diversity that corresponds to the multiplicity of ways to be trans. His book is, truly, an ethnographic work. Thus, it underlines the contradictions that structure reality itself. The lives of individuals are not an exemplification of some coherent theory, and neither is this study. It is, though, a well-written, honest, respectful, and often moving transcript of trans women's various narratives about their journeys, viewed in the light of different theories. It leads the reader to understand the implications of such discourses and practices nowadays, and how they have strong historical, social, and political roots.

However, given the number of questions addressed in this relatively short book, one might feel that each query calls for deeper treatment. While reading it, this reader felt the frustration of engaging with an analysis that appeared to fall shy of fully grasping the complexity of what it hopes to reveal. Nevertheless, starting with what could seem to be an anecdotal question, this book brilliantly raises some fundamental and very broad questions about the link between medicine and social norms, sex and gender, the body and the self. Thus, it could adequately be used as a complement to a lecture on gender studies, in order to

introduce some of the philosophical issues of trans studies. It also exemplifies what can be an articulate ethnographic work, skilfully combining description and theorization.

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