

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Morgan Holmes, *Intersex: A Perilous Difference*. Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2008, 189 pp. \$US 47.50 hardcover (978-1-57591-117-5).

The regulation of gender in the West is produced largely through self-regulating adherence to a compulsory binary sex-gender system, the repetition of highly stylized gender norms, and its effect on individual and collective identity and forms of life. A postmodern feminist perspective on gender and power uncovers how individuals are positioned within a nexus of norms that they are induced to repeat, thus sustaining a regime of difference and instating this difference as the “truth” of identity. Often this truth devolves onto a binary “sex” difference and becomes naturalized as gendered difference. The stakes of maintaining a binary-sex model for human sexuality are high, and the intensive biomedical intervention on the bodies of intersexed individuals is evidence of this process. Troubling this site of intensive biomedical normalization is intersexuality, and Canadian sociologist Morgan Holmes has written a compelling account of the lives of intersex folks and the effects of biomedical science on those whose lives intersect with medical knowledge, clinical practice, and cultural norms.

Intersex is a critical interrogation of the biomedical science and symbolic systems that pathologize sexed difference. Holmes provides personal accounts of intersex activists and their struggles, and draws from her own medical file as an intersex person. Intersexuality refers to a person who is born with a genital configuration that defies our culture’s immediate need to categorize each birth as strictly male or female. Often termed “ambiguous genitals,” there is a range of syndromes and “conditions” that are deemed intersex, both at the level of visible morphology and at the level of a chromosomal profile. Holmes’ own definition is useful: “intersexuality refers to a physical and/or chromosomal set of possibilities in which the features usually understood as belonging distinctly to either the male *or* female sex are combined in a single body” (p. 32). Intersex births are far more common than many people presume, but they have been deemed a medical “emergency” and surgical “correction” is commonly practiced. Holmes furnishes histories and counternarratives of those whose bodies have undergone such invasive procedures in order to make visible the physical harm and mental anguish that arise. These

stories provide a leverage point for a sustained critique of the prevailing assumptions of a biomedical science that abrogates to itself almost exclusive authority on the treatment and management of what it deems a “psychosocial emergency.”

Holmes challenges the practice of scientific knowledge production of intersexuality and uncovers how the increasingly technologized medical gaze is focused on narrower parameters of human experience and elemental morphologies (chromosomes, genes, and DNA), and occludes a cultural imperative in its scientific practices. Holmes’ critique is a counterpoint to the technologization of the practice of biomedical science. She shows it follows a logic similar to medicine’s predecessors in the 19th century which took the body of the “invert” and the female prostitute as a ground for its power-knowledge relations of clinical and professional expertise. Intersexuality has been a going concern for medical practice for centuries, but, in the 19th century, the lived reality and concept of “hermaphroditism” helped consolidate medical practice as scientific professional knowledge on variant bodies and its functions. Through a review of historical case studies and contemporary narratives drawn from a growing number of intersex activists, Holmes’ genealogical account positions intersexuality as an incipient critique of the epistemological and ontological assumptions of biomedical knowledge, its practices, and cultural norms.

Intersex: A Perilous Difference is part of an emerging critical literature on the subject of intersexuality that draws from postmodern feminism, queer theory, and Foucauldian studies of gender and sexuality. *Intersex* makes visible the material and symbolic violence that underpins the creation of a biomedical category and the techniques of clinical practice that render medical science a disavowed mode of normalization. Holmes wishes to open up a critical position that links new spaces for gender self-determination to a positive phenomenology of bodily difference. In this sense her text slides between a critical genealogy of medical discourse and its practices, and a concern for advocacy that respects the epistemological status of a growing intersex social movement. Biomedicine enforces gender normativity for infants and children under the banner of heteronormative developmental scripts as a teleological narrative of “psychosocial wellbeing.” However, a critique of these discourses is not necessarily advanced by claiming a special epistemological status for retrospective auto/biographical accounts by adult intersex activists. One of the ways normative sociality is accomplished is by its temporal structure that positions all developmental outcomes as evidence of pathological states in childhood. Although Holmes remains aware of these tensions, her account treads uneasily between the narratives gleaned from her personal interactions and the stories shared with

her by many intersexual friends and colleagues, fictional accounts drawn from literature and popular culture, and the cultural norms embedded in biomedical practices.

Holmes's text is a key document in the small but growing literature on critical approaches to intersexuality and the ethics of conducting research with/in marginalized communities. Holmes makes visible the often contradictory and problematic nature of critical scholarship on the lives of intersexuals, while identifying a need to sustain the integrity of self-authorship and control over the narratives of those whose lives she investigates and whose stories she presents. Holmes discusses an urgent and understandable need to *both* ground intersexuals' experiences of their own bodies and its meanings in a framework of autonomous identification practices, *and* the use of these counternarratives as a critique of the epistemological assumptions embedded in biomedical discourses and practices. Holmes discusses these competing tendencies through a discourse of autonomy for individual decision making, similar to the way transsexuals have, in part — through pressure applied by transrights movements — been able to assert agency in the self-determination of their own gendered self-presentation. By gaining the power of autonomy in decisions affecting the sexed morphologies of one's body, the individual drains away some of biomedicine's power to unreservedly shape the phenomenal reality of that individual's sense of self. Holmes discusses the contradictions and ethical problems related to the use of intersexual's narratives in a research environment in which gender and sex variant individuals' bodies and stories are "overaccessed." She discusses treading a line between being able to carve out a critical trajectory of intersexuality while maintaining the idea that individual choices for self-identification may present varying degrees of normative investments in binary gender presentations.

Intersex: A Perilous Difference represents an important contribution to the field of intersex studies. Scholars working in the area of post-modern feminism, Foucauldian studies, queer theory, and transsexual/transgender studies will find its treatment of biomedicine, bodies, sex/gender difference, and power useful for their own research and teaching in women's studies, sociology, and other disciplines concerned with a critical perspective in the human sciences.

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