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BOOK REVIEW

Engaging sex, sexuality, and gender in ethnography

REVIEWS OF *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture Among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes* by Don Kulick and *Flaming Souls: Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Social Change in Barbados* by David A.B. Murray

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COVER PHOTOGRAPHY Parinaz Adib of works by unknown graffitti artists

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Don Kulick. Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture Among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2009[1998]. 277 pages.

David A.B. Murray. Flaming Souls: Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Social Change in Barbados. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 2012. 160 pages.

reviewed by CURTIS DIXON UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, YORK UNIVERSITY

This review meditates on the various themes of sex, gender, and sexuality in the anthropological works of Maurice Godelier, Don Kulick, and David Murray. These brief vignettes consider each scholar individually and attempt to apply a critical anthropological analysis, first by unpacking their respective arguments and then determining their theoretical relevance within the discipline of anthropology.

The first of three sections begins with Godelier's (1981) quote regarding the historically "haunted" impasse of sex-negative (Rubin 1999) sexualities within the Western context; following the quote, Kulick's thoughts on the role of third genders/sexes among Brazilian *travestis* is reviewed from *Travesti: Sex, Gender and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes* (2009); lastly, David Murray's considerations of popular feedback media in Barbados, and its implications for stigmatized homosexuals, is assessed from his ethnography *Flaming Souls: Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Social Change in Barbados* (2012).

Using these examples I hope to illustrate how contemporary academics are engaging ethnography and anthropological methodologies within the realm of sex, sexuality, and gender. Each author presents a unique perspective on these themes, both engaging and personalizing their experiences within the discourse of sexuality. These rich data sets serve not only to gain an understanding of cross-cultural sexual performance, but can also, through ethnography, wield social scientists with the relevant tools to address future anthropological issues.

Maurice Godelier: "It is not sexuality which haunts society but society which haunts the body's sexuality" (The Origins of Male Domination, 1981)

What does it mean to discuss one's body as a repressed thing? The intimacy one has with their body is so definitively tied to identity and, by extension, one's well-being, so that to inhibit one's body, whether by force or coercion, implicates an act of repression. This is the reality of an incalculable number of individuals throughout history who, from antiquity to modernity, represent the gender-liminal / 'intermediate' gender (Besnier 1994), 'diseased' bodied, and 'sexually deviant' victims of their respective epoch in time (Weston 2011).

But, as we will see in this review, this tense relationship between the body and the social world does not have to be—precisely because it has not always been. This brief

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meditation will contextualize the "haunted" sexual body as it relates to society, first through a historical reflection on the nature of its fluidity, then by comparing ethnographic examples of repression, and also an analytical unpacking of why these phenomena persist. By using the term "haunted," Godelier means to describe an act of transgression. When he uses it in the quote "it is not sexuality which haunts society but society which haunts sexuality," we must understand the transgression not as an infraction on the part of the sexual individual—though he often is the scapegoat—but as an act of hubris and power by the society which deems the individual's sexuality as deviant. With that in mind, when we begin to discuss the body as a repressed sexual thing we must first understand the construction of its taxonomical gender/sexual hierarchies.

A common misconception in Western belief systems is the stasis of sexual identities. As Harding puts it, "The distinction most commonly made is between 'essentialist' and 'constructionist' approaches" (1998:6) substantiating a man-made regulation of what 'the sexual' comprises. The Western love-affair with dualism is extensively historically rooted: we have Descartes' substance and mind opposition, Christianity's moral good versus evil, Adam and Eve, the homosexual and the heterosexual. Although these binary systems are useful, they neglect certain grey areas between the extremes that beg the question: is duality always the way we should be thinking about these types of things?

Fausto-Sterling suggests the developmental systems theory as a method to understand sexuality/gender as a continuum rather than unchanging opposites vying for control of the body (2004:25). For example, a 'wild child' raised without human conditioning has the innate mechanics and drive for sex, but without socialization she knows not how to direct or understand her brooding desires. Much like the Möbius strip, the ribbon presents two alternating sides; a twisting duet seemingly born from nature (2004:24). In reality we are being deceived—the same side is running continuously, negating the need for a duality. The analogy stresses the somatic continuity of the body which exhibits variation, though nature presents it as an optical illusion. Short of advocating for a strict monistic approach, these ideas reveal avenues from which to platform new ideas in lieu of revisited dead-ends in the nature–nurture conversation.

When we examine sexuality deeper in the Western tradition, we likewise find ourselves at odds with inconsistency. Sexual orientation as a defining concept of personal identity did not exist in Classical Antiquity. The act of same-sex relationship was not the basis of one's *identity,* rather, it was a behaviour based around class and age which was divorced from the need for an additional constructions of identity and connotation (Roberts 2007).

Classical Greece however was not an egalitarian paradise free from gender and sexual 'hauntings', especially in regards to females and femininity. Men and boys who were "penetrated" were assumed to exhibit inherent feminine characteristics of passivity (Roberts 2007). Parallels can be drawn to the contemporary *travesti* of Brazil, in which young *viado* boys assume the receiving role in same-sex encounters, and by extension, assume feminine characteristics attributed to traditional constructs of what a women is (Kulick 2009). For women, 'hauntings' can be traced as far back to Greek theorists Hippocrates and Galen, both whom prescribed the antidote of marriage a nymphomaniac-like condition called *furor uterinus* (Groneman 1995:224).

The Victorian era, guided by the British puritanical bourgeois' sexual hegemony, marked a shift towards 'proper' utilitarian sexuality (Foucault 1978). Though sexuality

was grounded in certain norms before the seventeenth century, the marketplace for public conversation was now a transgressive act unfit for 'civilized life.' This "speaker's benefit" (1978:6) regulated language and exerted repressive power on non-compliant individuals. Because language becomes synonymous with knowledge, the prohibition of pleasure–knowledge ultimately becomes entangled in the polymorphous techniques of power within the broader discourse of sexuality (1978:11).

Women in the Victorian era were especially susceptible to repression because of their perceived closeness to nature, which suggested a threat to civilization: "Women were more easily overwhelmed by the power of their sexual passion because they were closer to nature … potential for explosive sexuality jeopardized the self-discipline and control of desire that the Victorian middle class asserted" (Groneman 1995:233). Naturalization of sexualities and genders found a comfortable place within the framework of the scientific method, where sexologists could demarcate distinctive physiological responses with a degree of "objectivity" (Harding 1998:8). This "flora and fauna" approach became conflated by searching for the "the big picture," whereby sexual form outside of Western sexual hegemony was 'savage-like' and lagging behind in the social Darwinist unilinear social-evolutionary model (Harding 1998:15).

Returning to Godelier's quote, we can see how individual bodies have been "haunted" by a range of social establishments throughout space and time. The perceived threat of individual bodies on society are often more complex than they seem; they are frequently stand-ins for hidden inequalities of race, class, ideology, nationalism, and colonialism— masquerading as sin or morally ambiguous. These "spectral ghosts" or "bogeymen" (Murray 2012) represent heretofore marginalized groups, and as such, are easy targets to vilify in order for vilifiers to make sense of their changing world. This first text outlines the issues of misrepresentation of marginalized groups while ignoring systemic undercurrents which makeup that representation. As such, Godelier's ideas on the "haunted" individual, whereby sexual minorities must linger in the shadows of a foregrounded sexual hegemony, is a fitting set-up for both Kulick and Murray's ethnographies—both of which address the issues and implications of sexual and gendered normalization.

Don Kulick: Exploring third gender/sex in *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes*

The liminality of gender shifts the foundations of our biological and social understandings of the world. How do we understand ideas of homosexuality and third sex/genders when our science stresses strict needs for Darwinian natural selection, reproductive fitness, and speciation? Additionally, the social Western world acknowledges the natural binary truism of men and women dating back to our most dated traditional canon.

The easy answer may be to maintain our taxonomical distinctions, labeling anything outside our agreed upon pre-sets as unnatural, deviant, or diseased. Aside from being incredibly cruel and inhumane, this approach is not consistent with the natural world outside of human culture. In a TEDx event, Joan Roughgarden (2011) describes the great variety of sexuality in the animal kingdom. Commonsense, according to Roughgarden, would dictate that sexual liminality is the exception not the rule. As she suggests however, there are over 300 species that have been officially documented in primary works noting this phenomena. For example one in three species existing along the coral reefs either

exhibit both sexes or change sexes at some point in their life. Wrasse fish exchange anatomic sexes, and the reversal of sex roles, whereupon the egg is carried by the male instead of the female, is exhibited in sea horses, pipefish, and birds. Furthermore homosexual acts are ubiquitously apparent in the animal kingdom, especially among our closest ape cousins.

Among human-beings, we can challenge the biological imperative by posing the question, why do people have sex? A study of college students listed 237 reasons for sex which included biological reproduction, but also pleasure, money, love, spiritual transcendence, novelty, exercise, curiosity, duty, social status, self-esteem, attraction, and revenge (Miller 2012). Given our understanding of sexual liminality we can then ask the question: Why have anthropologists developed the term third sex/gender?

Third sex/gender terms give a framework from which to understand gender difference which exists beyond the traditional gender binary. In places where third sex/gender occurs, the term acknowledges them on an institutional level rather than being a fringe or unincorporated subcultural group. These groups do not necessitate biological categorization, although depending on the specific group, they can. The fluidity and capaciousness of this definition is meant to provide a broad and inclusive identifier for anthropologists to utilize when speaking about genders outside of common male and female dualities. Stephen O. Murray (1994) has critiqued this categorization suggesting that third gender/sex still works within the paradigm of Western binarism, as seeking a "third" option implies a hybrid or portion of the traditional sexes. Though Murray's claim is valid, perhaps the most accurate way to describe these groups for social scientists is by allowing them to inscribe themselves, utilizing the group name they use.

Brazilian *travestis* are a group which initially seem representative of this third gender classification. From an early age many 'to-be' *travesti* boys are keen on embodying femininity to its fullest, dreaming of becoming 'true' *travestis* (*travesti mesmo*) through a transformation consisting of *aplicação de silicone* (silicone application) and hormone treatment (Kulick 2009). The reservations of applying the third gender label arises when Kulick remarks: "What is evident in *travesti* talk about transsexuals is their firm conviction that one can never change sex. If you are born with a tendency to have a penis … then you are a man, and, as Banana says, you will die a man" (2009:87). In Western gender hegemony this may be an idea that seems frankly hypocritical; *travestis* spend their lives transforming their bodies into feminized creations and yet do not consider themselves as, or want to become women, even berating transsexuals who have had operations to remove their genitalia (2009:86).

Reading Kulick's ethnographic excerpt, one may understand the *transvesti*'s reasoning by thinking of femininity differently. Recognizing femininity as something which may exists independently in both males and females, the reasoning becomes clear. Both binary genders may tap into this characteristic behaviour, often females more so, but it is not exclusive to the realm of women. In this framework men who are born anatomically male will always remain men, but they may negotiate and accumulate their feminine essence to any degree they desire.

The eunuchs represent another group sometimes categorized as third gender. The film *Harsh Beauty* (2005), which documents the lives of several eunuchs living in Indian society, shows how they balance their threshold existence between acceptance and undesirable

among their fellow Indians. Their final passage requires a ritual castration to complete their transformation, along with the less intense day-to-day performances of traditional female gender-roles, many working as prostitutes to make daily ends. Where we may be correct in categorizing the eunuchs as a third gender categorization—where the *travesti* differed—is by their own endorsement of gender autonomy. As one eunuch states in the film: some men like women, some men like other men, and some men like *us*.

Gender liminality and third gender labels are evolving ideas which do not exist in a vacuum. Because we see such a wide variation of identity and sexual practices cross-culturally—from the *travesti* and eunuch discussed here, to Bajan queens (Murray 2012), to the *fa'afafine* of Samoa—one must be aware of the social constructions which make up our understandings of gender normativity. To understand these concepts we may one day choose to dispose of our inclination of duality, choosing instead to grasp gender / sexuality in more reflexive terms which addresses sexuality in terms of continuum and not closed systems.

David Murray: Exploring the opinions of popular feedback media in *Flaming Souls: Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Social Change in Barbados*

The negative opinions of homosexuality in Barbadian feedback media constitute a complex array of intersections which collectively formulate a narrative of homophobia (Murray 2012). Though these homophobic belief systems are publicly broadcasted on popular media channels throughout Barbados, Murray notes how it is critical to avoid a reaction which would paint every Bajan with the same brush. Calling an entire nation homophobic is not only a simplification of the facts but has deep-seated implications, surfacing legacies of colonialism and jeopardizing its citizens to value judgements when travelling abroad.

The following will be an overview of what form this feedback media takes, what is being said and who is saying it, and how media shapes the Barbadian socio-political landscape. With an understanding of what is going on we can then analyze the cached forces which provide the foundation for why homophobia exists. By noting the organized public meetings, the discourse of sexual rights, and ethnographic documentation of gays and queens, Murray (2012) weaves the social tapestry of homosexuality of Barbados into a concise narrative.

Homophobia is rarely just about homosexuality. Its precepts represent a constructed apparition of masculinity, gender, political powers and balance, race, and other intersections, which, when understood, turns the spectral mediascape into an understandable concept. "Wrong, immoral, dangerous, corrupt, perverted, and sin" are the common terminology heard in the Bajan media when speaking of same-sex marriage (2012:17). Barbadians who express their opinions on popular feedback generally use a variation of one or more of these themes to justify their feelings: the nation's law which are subjectively read to include homosexual discrimination, Christian morality, nation morality compared to other nations, local homosexuality created by global actors (spurred by consumerism), and the 'diseased' body which hosts HIV / AIDS (2012:21).

Murray suggests that these surges of intolerance stem not from a simple hatred for LGBT people, but as structural inequity which provokes people to intolerance. As an economy transitioning to a 'feminine' service-based industry, those looking to a romanticized

past adopt a sort of "nationalist nostalgia myth" which posits the romanced past as a time of prosperity and peace and mind (2012:24). The spectral 'new pariah' of the millennium represents a fabricated figure—an unseen and unobservable scapegoat—who is the cause for all that is bad in contemporary Barbados. This belief in an unreal figure negates the desire to understand any outside forces which carry baggage from Barbados' colonial past, causing knee-jerk reactions when global forces like the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* or the *International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights* challenge the sovereignty of this independent state when suggestions of human right principals are made in local contexts (2012:42-3).

Though moving forward means challenging the current human rights, legislation, and culture of Barbados, caution must be exercised when describing existent homophobia. Blanketing entire societies as 'homophobic' has implications which reignite colonial legacies, where 'civilized west versus the rest' attitudes create hierarchies based on misattributed Darwinian principals. Additionally, by identifying nations as homophobic on the world stage, we implicate its citizens, causing problems when immigrants wish to enter countries but are turned away due to incorrigible values that are not compatible with the accepting nation's.

As Murray suggests, if negative opinions on homosexuality are to change an internal dialogue must occur (2012:47). This dialogue must develop from within the culture, not by transnational force, and must be read within the vernacular of existing cultural norms.

Conclusion

The three authors, though addressing culturally divergent practices and beliefs, collectively meditate on a common theme: how sexuality and gender can become convoluted when the individual interacts with the social world. The usefulness of anthropological insight with its insistence on participant-observation, history with the sexualities, and its general self-reflexive manner, positions anthropology in a unique way to address sexual discourse.

The anthropologists selected for this review employ those anthropological techniques to contemplate their specific research topics, but the result often speaks to larger currents in sexual anthropology. Though Godelier speaks of the "haunted" individual, the idea of the transgressive deviant "pariahs" in Murray's ethnography meets at the threshold of common experience. Likewise, Kulick's *travestis* meet at this threshold, showing how both their diversities and commonalities of sexual experiences traverse both time and space. Thinking about how these ethnographies fit into the matrix of sexual studies, and their ability to transform our knowledge about ourselves, allows us to contextualize each narrative into greater understandings of what it means to be a gendered, sexed, and sexual body in the social world.

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