

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

MORGAN HOLMES, *Intersex: A Perilous Difference*. Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2008, x + 157 p., index.

Morgan Holmes' book *Intersex: A Perilous Difference* examines intersexuality through the lens of cultural representations of intersex persons, medical narratives, and psychological discourse on sex differences. Reflecting on her fifteen years of academic work and political activism, the author provides a strong criticism of our understanding of intersex as an abnormal, monstrous condition which should be medically corrected and eliminated from our society.

The author's main argument is that intersex people are troubling, rather than troubled, due to their condition. When infants are diagnosed as intersex, they usually are not concerned with their genitalia and chromosomal makeup. Yet, their condition is troubling for their parents and families, for medical specialists, and for society as a whole. Therefore, young children are subjected to various surgical procedures with a naïve belief that "correcting" the baby's sex as early as possible will ensure successful gender socialization in the future. Morgan Holmes bases her theoretical argument on post-modernist feminist theory and Judith Butler's queer theory and thereby challenges these assumptions.

In the author's view, sex is no less a cultural construct than gender. Constructing sex categories as binary opposites of male/female, our society would rather reconstruct bodies which do not fit these categories than reconsider current beliefs about true sexes. Whatever is not fitting the category of male has to be categorized as female. Therefore, the author suggests, close to 90% of all intersex infants are assigned the sex of a female – even when they have a penis (which is too small) or have male chromosomal makeup.

Drawing on medical literature dealing with intersex persons, Holmes shows how the meaning of being intersex is constructed in bio-medical discourse. The medical need to "fix" intersex bodies comes from the reassuring confidence that the human species does, indeed, have two sexes and that these two sexes are very different in their physiological and psychological makeup. Once the belief in two separate, opposing sexes is established, everything that does not fit the binary model of male versus female is defined as deviant. Thus medical practitioners advocate correcting the baby's sex as early as possible in order that the baby fit the appropriate sex category and is able to fulfill her/his gender destiny according to our social norms.

Holmes is very critical of the bio-medical treatment of intersex children. She suggests that we ought to question the ethical aspect of such treatment, which is

often done for cosmetic purposes without the patient's consent and with as little information as possible provided to the parents. She also demonstrates that often the procedures do more harm than good and intersex people are physically and psychologically traumatised due to the medical treatment they received during their childhood. Finally, she challenges the legal aspect of the procedures performed on infants with no real medical need.

That said, bio-medicine is just a part of our culture. It certainly serves our society by "fixing" intersex individuals, but it definitely cannot be solely responsible for the representations of intersex people as deviant. Analyzing various cultural representations of intersex people in literature and on television, the author demonstrates that hermaphrodites are usually constructed either as an "exotic Other" or as "monsters." Both of these representations, however, work toward re-establishing the boundaries between the norm (normal, heterosexual males and females) and abnormal bodies (deviant bodies of intersex people).

Although the author's theoretical argument is clear and well-formulated, there are some methodological questions which are left unanswered. Holmes does not really inform us about the methods she used to collect and analyze her data. For instance, in the chapter dealing with cultural representations of intersex people, she analyzes a number of texts of different genres (literature, magazines and television shows) by language and country of origin (France and America); and by year of publication (some are recent and some date back to the nineteenth century). Why were these texts selected for the analysis? Are there any other texts providing alternate representations of intersex individuals? How active is the discourse on intersex individuals in literature and popular media? These issues remain unclear to the reviewer.

Similarly, Holmes does not detail how she collected the personal accounts of intersex individuals. Although she informs us about her participation in online discussion groups and various activists' enterprises, it is not clear how many people she actually communicated with or how many personal accounts she used while working on this book. Nevertheless, she points out that this information is crucial to the accurate representation of intersex research. In her introduction, she devotes a number of pages to the argument against the misrepresentation of intersex individuals, which she believes was done by another recent author, Sharon Preves. Holmes argues that Preves did not interview a representative sample of the intersex community since she was only in touch with those involved in activism. However, Holmes does not explain how her data collection is different than that done by Preves.

Methodological questions aside, the book provides an interesting and engaging account of our society's cultural representation of intersex people. Morgan Holmes' ability to contextualize the troubling nature of intersex in the larger social context and cultural beliefs about sex and gender allows readers to see a comprehensive picture of the politics of intersex and the management of deviant bodies in our society. The theoretical richness of this book gives readers an opportunity to reflect on cultural constructions of sex, gender, and our bodies.

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