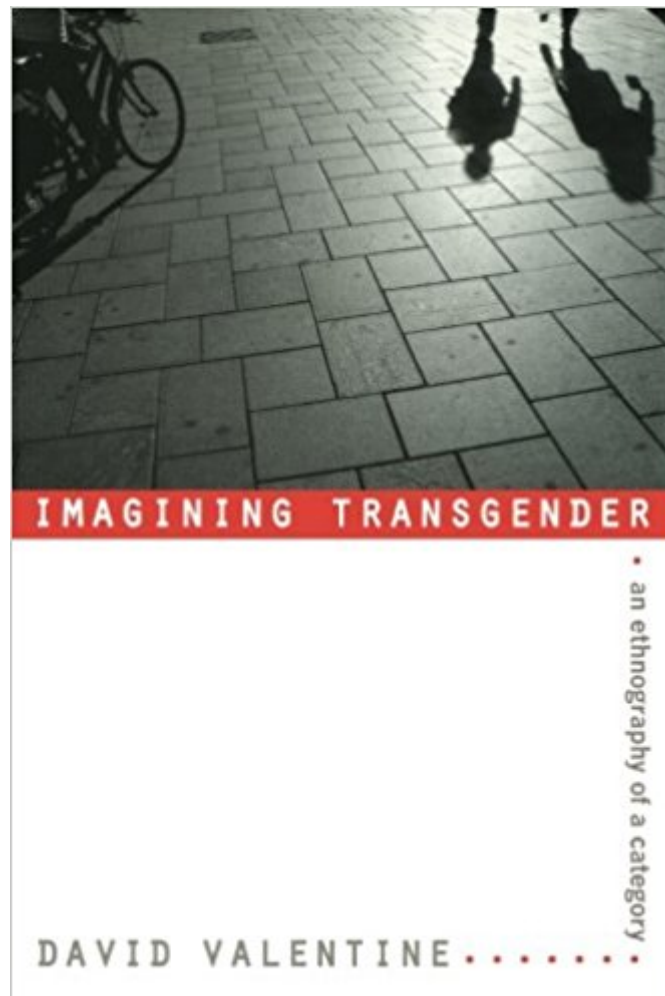




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# Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography Of A Category



## Synopsis

Imagining Transgender is an ethnography of the emergence and institutionalization of transgender as a category of collective identity and political activism. Embraced by activists in the early 1990s to advocate for gender-variant people, the category quickly gained momentum in public health, social service, scholarly, and legislative contexts. Working as a safer-sex activist in Manhattan during the late 1990s, David Valentine conducted ethnographic research among mostly male-to-female transgender-identified people at drag balls, support groups, cross-dresser organizations, clinics, bars, and clubs. However, he found that many of those labeled “transgender” by activists did not know the term or resisted its use. Instead, they self-identified as “gay,” a category of sexual rather than gendered identity and one rejected in turn by the activists who claimed these subjects as transgender. Valentine analyzes the reasons for and potential consequences of this difference, and how social theory is implicated in it. Valentine argues that “transgender” has been adopted so rapidly in the contemporary United States because it clarifies a model of gender and sexuality that has been gaining traction within feminism, psychiatry, and mainstream gay and lesbian politics since the 1970s: a paradigm in which gender and sexuality are distinct arenas of human experience. This distinction and the identity categories based on it erase the experiences of some gender-variant people—particularly poor persons of color—who conceive of gender and sexuality in other terms. While recognizing the important advances transgender has facilitated, Valentine argues that a broad vision of social justice must include, simultaneously, an attentiveness to the politics of language and a recognition of how social theoretical models and broader political economies are embedded in the day-to-day politics of identity.

## Book Information

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Duke University Press (August 30, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0822338696

ISBN-13: 978-0822338697

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.8 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 15.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 9 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #145,073 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #37 in Books > Textbooks >

## Customer Reviews

“David Valentine had the good fortune to be conducting anthropological fieldwork in New York at the precise moment when a new term, *transgender*, was first coming into widespread use. Now we have the good fortune of sharing his ethnographic insight into this new category’s emergence. *Imagining Transgender* offers a provocative on-the-ground account of this important shift in Western notions of gender identity and sexuality. The book is sure to stir debate in the emerging field of transgender studies, as well as in other disciplines that concern themselves with this timely topic.”

—Susan Stryker, coeditor of *The Transgender Studies Reader*

“The definitive study that documents the rise and spread of *transgender* as a category and a field of knowledge, activism, and power but also as a mechanism for disenfranchisement, discrimination, and violence. Deeply learned, wonderfully accessible, and ethnographically rich, this remarkable book sets a new benchmark not only for all future work on transgender but also for how we might think about gender, sexuality, identity, and politics more generally.”

—Don Kulick, author of *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes*

“There is a paucity of ethnographically based work on transgender, and David Valentine’s book is a major contribution not only ethnographically but also historically and theoretically. Valentine is concerned with a range of value and political questions, committed explicitly to humane positions without being ideological or propagandist.”

—Esther Newton, author of *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay: Personal Essays, Public Ideas*

“*Imagining Transgender* proceeds through sophisticated and multilayered analysis. It offers a new way to approach gender and the institutions that name and manage it, and this is a provocative contribution. . . . Scholars will find this readable and engaging book well worth their time, as it will allow them to develop a nuanced understanding of transgender and its social ramifications.”

—(Anne Enke *NWSA Journal*)

“David Valentine’s *Imagining Transgender* is a well-written and well-executed ethnography that is able to balance a critical take on the category of transgender while not denigrating those most affected by rethinking the term. . . . *Imagining Transgender* is an example of what we as ethnographers should be doing and is a must read not only for those in transgender studies, gay and lesbian studies, or queer studies, but throughout the field of anthropology.”

—(Anne Rohlman *Journal of Homosexuality*)

“Valentine’s writing manages to be both

theoretically insightful and accessible. Whether musing on his bicycle as he travels between fieldwork sites of the street and the drag ball, or reflecting on conversations with clients and staff at GIP, Valentine presents a humorous, touching and very relevant political tale of the state of play of transsexual and transgender life in the United States. This is an extremely valuable contribution to work on gender and sexual diversities, and, importantly, a very enjoyable read. (Sally Hines Sexualities)

"Valentine. . . does an excellent job in showing just how messy the category of transsexual and transgender is; how it was born of a variety of discursive practices; how those discursive practices had little to do with the lived realities of many of the people the term transsexual and transgender claims to represent; and how taking the time to think critically about transgender as a category can create space, literal and symbolic, for those whose lives most thoroughly blur the neat distinctions between some of the foundational categories of our time: male/female, straight/gay, represented/not represented." (Laurie Essig American Journal of Sociology)

"David Valentine had the good fortune to be conducting anthropological fieldwork in New York at the precise moment when a new term, 'transgender,' was first coming into widespread use. Now we have the good fortune of sharing his ethnographic insight into this new category's emergence. "Imagining Transgender" offers a provocative on-the-ground account of this important shift in Western notions of gender identity and sexuality. The book is sure to stir debate in the emerging field of transgender studies, as well as in other disciplines that concern themselves with this timely topic."--Susan Stryker, coeditor of "The Transgender Studies Reader"

Although the book was written earlier on and centered on a community that was once more oppressed than it is now currently, the book does an astounding job of portraying the intermingling LGBTQ communities that developed, and the types of social bubbles within the larger structure. This book did its job in the end and educated me on the LGBTQ community and how it certainly came to be.

Very thoughtful analysis and far ahead of the rest of the academy's interest in transgender experience and issues.

Good, no complaints about purchase.

Very good seller, would recommend!

This book gives an interesting look into a world that few people are knowledgeable about. In it, Valentine simply shatters any preconceived notions about the transgender community. Instead, Valentine shows just how complex the transgender community is. Dealing with the issue of category and how it's defined, you get to witness the complexity of identity throughout the book. Valentine uses his notes from support groups, parties and many other functions he attended. I would recommend this book to any person interested in dealing with how identities or categories are formed.

David Valentine's book seeks to bring to light the margins of a marginalized community, that is those who may or may not identify with the already marginalized group of "transgendered." Valentine does a very well job of giving context to the category and why it has become a problematic thing. He seeks to shed light on what the category is, or possibly that it is a category that can never be definitely defined, and even further how the creation and inclusion of such a category has in many ways lead to further the discrimination of people who do not identify with the, now defined category of transgender and its underpinnings based in gender variance.

David Valentine has already won several prizes for this book, and no wonder. His book is an astonishing look at the idea of transgender--as a category. Smug Americans may think they know what transgender is, but as Professor Valentine unpacks this concept, the reader is treated to a myriad of meanings and nuances that show the amazing variety to be found in human gender. In looking at transgender, Valentine forces all readers to consider what normal gender definitions are. This healthy self-reflective exercise should help everyone to broaden their minds--and their categories. It is beautifully written, and hard to lay down once started. Though I am a colleague of the author, I am no less impressed by this work.

Valentine puts the reader into his shoes as he wriggles his way into the topic of Transgender. He has an excellent body of people to work with and amazing insight into the everyday life of those society would deem trans. However, the way he uses this knowledge is not always morally correct or understandable to the reader. Good book overall though.

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