Book Reviews

The Moral Parameters of Good Talk: A Feminist Analysis. Maryann Neely Ayim. Wilfrid Laurier Press: Waterloo, Ontario, 1997; viii + 255 pages; ISBN 0-88920-282-6; $45.00 (cloth).

Ayim argues that speech is a form of behaviour and should be subject to moral constraints, as other forms of behaviour are. Her argument is a standard liberal one: speech that harms others justifiably may be restricted. But what harms does speech cause? Ayim begins with the empirical literature on conversation patterns: generally in mixed-sex groups, men and boys speak a great deal more than women and girls, men interrupt women much more than women interrupt men, and men control the topics of conversations. Conversational time, like all time, is limited, and men take much more than their fair share of it.

The book examines not only the dynamics of speech (who speaks and how they speak) but also the content of speech (what they say). One of the most important chapters in this book is the one on "political correctness." Here Ayim argues that considering racist or sexist language to be no more than "bad manners" involves three false assumptions: first, that all speech should be exempt from moral analysis or censure, even speech that interferes with others' freedom of expression; second, that all harms are individual, so systemic harm is impossible and social context is irrelevant; and third, that attempts to reform language are political but the status quo is apolitical.

Speech as a behaviour is not a matter of "mere etiquette," Ayim says; people who argue that all speech should be exempt from moral consideration "reduce genuinely ethical considerations to merely political ones" (184). What's "mere" about etiquette or politics, though? Of course whether we put napkins on the left or right, or the nature of the relationship between political subterritories and the federal government, are not moral matters. But how we treat others, whether in private gatherings, social institutions or the public forum, most assuredly are moral matters. When a reader asks Miss Manners, "What am I supposed to say when I am introduced to a homosexual couple'?" and Miss Manners replies, "Gentle Reader: 'How do you do?' 'How do you do?'," Miss Manners is doing ethics.[1] When we criticize racist or sexist speech because it "jeopardizes our attainment of truth" (103) or because it promotes hatred against already disadvantaged groups, our political criticisms have great moral import.

This book presents a strong argument for the claim that speech is a form of behaviour and thus is subject to moral evaluation. Ayim could have strengthened her argument further by recognizing that speech also is a matter of etiquette and politics, but that these too are behaviours and thus are moral matters.

REFERENCE

1. Judith Martin. *Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior*. New York: Warner Books, 1979, pp. 67.

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FTM: Female to Male Transsexuals in Society. Holly Devor. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1997; photographs; appendix; bibliography; subject index; participant index; xxviii +695 pages; ISBN 0-253-33631-7; $69.95.

FTM: Female to Male Transsexuals in Society, Holly Devor's contribution to the wanting literature on transsexuality, looks to a direction previously little-explored. Writing as an academic "outsider" (not transsexual herself), Devor's research is based on interviews with forty-five self-identified FTM transsexual men at various stages of transition. Her contribution is important for two reasons. First, it breaks from both autobiographical work, and a predominantly MTF focus significantly influenced by the anti-transsexual diatribe of Janice Raymond. Second, instead of a facile reliance on theorizing abstracted from the lifeworlds of transsexual

persons, Devor's work turns our attention to lived experience.

In the first two chapters of a twenty-six chapter text, Devor outlines the significant historical background and theories of transsexualism, informing the reader that while transsexuals have probably always existed, what is specific to this century is the reign of "ideologies and technologies of gender" (35) that makes it possible to change sex characteristics. In chapters three through twenty-five, Devor proceeds to recount the narratives of her participants from childhood through post-transition.

Despite Devor's considerable efforts to hear the words of her participants I am left unsettled by an uneasy tension in the text. Devor recognizes "that transsexualism exists because the natural world thrives on biodiversity....[and] genders and sexes naturally occur in far more than the two types which patriarchal gender schemas prescribe" (67). As well she problematizes "[o]ur dogged insistence on framing our thoughts on the basis of dualistic categorizations" (608), acknowledging further that transsexuals, by virtue of being transsexual, are not pathologically ill. However, much of her protracted questionnaire as well as the theoretical foundation for her analysis seems to be predicated on the socialization thesis of unhealthy family dynamics as causal of gender dysphoria. Also reminiscent of a neo-Freudian-Bowlbyesque analysis, Devor blames parenting, especially inattentive, shrewish, or alternatively fragile and diminished mothering for gender dysphoric daughters who want to be like men because, she says for her participants, as in the title of Chapter Six, "Men Rule."

Devor comes to these conclusions from an opportunity sample and responses to a questionnaire which often focuses on parenting but has no control group against which to measure results. Yet, when participants were asked why they were transsexual they were "nearly unanimous ... that...they were born...females...destined to become men" (561). As well, most participants' families were "driven by compassion and love for participants" and accepted their transsexualism "admirably" (435). This picture of the parents of Devor's participants is not the one presented in earlier chapters where she describes a legion of injurious parental pathologies. Further, this tension between pre-formed theory and transsexual experience is expressed in Devor's pronoun strategy wherein she uses "she" to refer to the participant pre-transition and "he" for post-transition. "Insiders" regard "being she'ed" as a misreading of their experience.

Perhaps this tension in an otherwise impressive work speaks to the unsteady transition of academic "outside" theorizing, as it begins to pull away from abstracted theory first, toward experience first; and a transition from subject as object of inspection distorted in procrustean theory, to subject and experience as shaping theory. Casting her own foot forward first, Devor guides the reader along a thought-provoking path. I look forward to seeing where her next step will land.

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Screen Dreams: Fantasising Lesbians in Film. Clare Whatling. Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 1997; vii + 184; video stills; ISBN 0-7190-5067-7; $28.95 (paper).

Screen Dreams is a reclamation of that which is often perceived as the "wishful thinking" of lesbians (and others) who read lesbianism into/onto filmic texts and film stars; especially those texts and stars not definitively "lesbian." Any film is up for "lesbianising" by its viewers, according to Clare Whatling, as are the films' stars. She considers these re-contexualized lesbian appropriations to be a productive strategy of reception, one critical to our identifications and fantasies as lesbian spectators and as typically excluded subjects of popular film culture.

An optimistic account, *Screen Dreams* is an effort to re-assess and re-value the tradition of lesbians in film as psycho-killer dykes, predatory vampires, or the typical, hopelessly dejected, sexual invert, destined for insanity and/or death. In what I find to be her most intriguing discussion, Whatling