

BOOK REVIEW

***Discursive Intersexions: Daring Bodies between Myth, Medicine, and Memoir.* Michaela Koch Bielefeld: Transcript Publishing, 2017 (ISBN 978-3-8376-3705-2)**

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In *Discursive Intersexions*, Michaela Koch offers what she describes as five analytical “snapshots” in the history of the terms *hermaphroditism*, *intersex*, and their grammatical variants (19). By stressing that these are only snapshots or distinct moments in the vast, convoluted discursive fields surrounding these terms,¹ Koch nicely underscores her intended use of Foucault’s principles of literary discourse analysis and the Haraway-credited recognition that her own position as author-analyst-critic is partial, situated, and removed. Reading these introductory remarks, two questions come to the fore.

First, since the authors of most of the texts Koch analyzes are described or self-identify as hermaphrodites or intersex, is a Foucauldian analysis appropriate? This question is prompted by Cheryl Walker’s “Feminist Literary Criticism and the Author,” which argues that a strictly applied Foucauldian analysis runs the risk of effacing the political import of an author’s identity, subjectivity, and sociohistorical location. In response to Foucault’s dismissive “What difference does it make who is speaking?” Walker cites the work of feminist, Marxist literary critic Cora Kaplan. On Walker’s account, Kaplan fruitfully employs Foucauldian principles while recognizing that advancing her political projects depends on “talk about authors as historical agents of cultural criticism and change” (Walker 1990/2002, 155). The first question then is whether the analytic toolkit Koch employs is sufficiently supplemented for the purposes of recognizing these authors as astute critics and change agents and advancing her political project. This leads to the second question.

Does the fact that Koch “speaks as a non-intersex scholar” and is thus “removed from much of the texts and materials” under analysis disqualify her from making a positive contribution to debates over the meaning and use of *hermaphroditism* or *intersex*? (14). This is a crucial question that should be asked by all of us nonintersex scholars who have or are considering working on this topic. Koch does an excellent job of describing the situation she and others find ourselves in: “I am aware that I am making these texts the objects of my analysis and am caught up in a patriarchal trap: the non-intersex scholar analyzes and produces unsolicited meaning about hermaphroditism and intersex” (14–15). How does one escape this trap? How can someone write a manuscript aiming to analyze and hopefully ameliorate a situation where another’s voice has been silenced or co-opted without imposing their own author-analyst-critic mode of silencing and co-opting? For my part, the answer is you can’t. So, Koch is wise not

to offer up any means of escape. Instead, she simply explains how she is “entangled” with these texts and their respective authorial voices:

[A]s an intersex ally who values the voices of intersex people for political reasons; as a genderqueer person whose experiences in a heteronormative society shape my awareness of the violence of sex and gender norms, and not least as an avid reader of texts that critically negotiate the gender binary. (14)

Here we start to see the political project motivating Koch’s analysis. By providing five high-resolution snapshots, she intends to better illuminate what Kate Manne correctly describes as the “inaccurate and pernicious” character of a heteronormative gender-binary system (Manne 2018, 27).

Given the ubiquity of the binary system, the various ways in which it inflicts harm, and the multiple subject positions targeted for harm, the mere fact that Koch speaks from a nonintersex position does not disqualify her from successfully pursuing this project. In fact, as I hope to show in summarizing the five snapshots, Koch’s toolkit is rich enough and her close readings sensitive enough that she ably talks about the authors of hermaphrodite memoirs, intersex testimonies, and intersex short stories as agents who resist and disrupt a discursive field where certain bodies become signifiers for mythical or medical oddities.

Discursive Intersexions consists of two main parts: “Hermaphrodite Narratives” and “Intersex Narratives.” Each part begins with a brief survey of the history and literature on the relevant term (*hermaphrodite* or *intersex*) and a survey of the various discourses (legal, medical, activist, mythic, and fictional) within which the narratives are situated. Part I provides a close reading of *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century French Hermaphrodite* and *Aus eines Mannes Mädchenjahren (Memoirs of a Man’s Maiden Years)*. Part II provides similarly close readings of three discursive events: the medical and journalistic publications on the story of David Reimer juxtaposed against first-person intersex stories or testimonies by Cheryl Chase and other members of the Intersex Society of North American (ISNA); the novel *Middlesex* by nonintersex author Jeffrey Eugenides; and a collection of short stories and poetry entitled *Intersex (for Lack of a Better Word)* by intersex activist and former board member of ISNA Thea Hillman. In keeping with Koch’s project of providing detailed snapshots of texts and the discursive field surrounding them, she focuses her surveys and analyses primarily on Anglo-American and Western European texts. And in keeping with her Foucauldian methodology, she treats each occurrence of *hermaphrodite* and *intersex* and each publication as a discursive event. This is to say that the meanings of a term and interpretations of a text emerging from Koch’s analysis include the conditions of production and distribution, as well as their uptake and reception (or lack thereof) in public and specialized discursive practices.

Although Koch stresses the specificity and discontinuity of a discursive event, it is clear that her mode of presentation aims at foregrounding and supporting several main claims or take-aways. She summarizes these at the end of each chapter and in the conclusion. In my summary of the five snapshots, I reference just a few of the take-aways that I considered especially insightful and well-supported in regard to (1) contributing to ongoing debates over sex and gender taxonomies and lexicons, (2) providing a more fine-grained analysis of the binary system, and (3) advancing the political project of becoming a more effective intersex ally.

In “Truth or Dare: The Memoirs of Herculine Babin,” Koch convincingly argues that *Memoirs* serves to challenge the authority of any discursive practice or event presuming to speak the truth about the sex of Babin’s body and present it as an unambiguous signifier for a well-defined sex, gender, and sexual identity. The scope of this challenge extends to Foucault’s 1978 republishing of French physician Ambrose Tardieu’s 1874 publication of Babin’s self-narrative. As Koch points out, these publications frame Babin’s narrative within selected “official” medical reports and their own editorial glosses (49). Foucault’s subtitle, *Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, demonstrates the identity-conferring power of such framings, since “neither Babin himself nor the doctors of his time called him a *hermaphrodite*” (73). Koch’s close reading of the text effectively shows that Babin, as well as his doctors and religious confessors, oscillates between male and female ascriptions, and that these ascriptions are driven primarily by an interest in “normalizing” Babin’s relationship to his long-time lover Sara. Based on this reading, Babin’s text serves to expose the arbitrary and contingent nature of taxonomies of sex, gender, and sexual identity, including those like Foucault’s that seek to move beyond a heteronormative binary. It similarly demonstrates the inadequacies of these taxonomies and the discursive practices authorizing them to capture the uniqueness of a lived experience. Koch rightly lays claim to having shown how “presumably low-ranking knowledges, i.e. experienced-based, local accounts such as Babin’s memoirs, challenge supposedly more prestigious or scientific accounts” and, I would add, philosophical, literary, critical, and academic-activist accounts (244).²

In the second snapshot, Koch continues to illuminate the internal inconsistencies in the use of *hermaphroditism* and goes further in showing how this usage subverts and supports medical and juridical praxes governed by a patriarchal binary system. At the turn of the twentieth century, German doctor and gay-rights activist Magnus Hirschfeld gave a series of lectures where he cited the case study of patient Anna Lambs (aka Martha/Karl Baer aka Nora/Norbert Body aka author of *Memoirs of a Man’s Maiden Years*). Hirschfeld cited this and other case studies as evidence for the claim that while “true’ hermaphroditism” in humans was rare, science had proven it “was real” and people of a “doubtful sex” were a “frequent occurrence” (77). However, Hirschfeld also provided expert testimony in Baer’s request to officially transition from female to male and claimed that Baer was unequivocally and truly male. Moreover, despite its title, Body’s recounting of his years as Nora, and *Maiden Years*’ popular reception, Koch reports there was a consensus of opinion among the public, the publisher, Hirschfeld, and the author himself that Body was undoubtedly male (80). She further shows that Nora’s voice is systematically amended by Norbert and the masculine voice of the narrator. By juxtaposing Hirschfeld’s activist agenda and Nora/Norbert’s (aka Martha/Karl’s) narrative accounts against Hirschfeld’s “official” declarations and *Maiden Years*’ mansplaining, Koch spotlights both the resilience and stress points of the binary.

In her analyses of Babin’s *Memoirs* and Body’s *Maiden Years*, Koch introduces three themes further developed in part II. First, use of the term *hermaphrodite* mythologizes the bodies and experiences of intersex people, thereby entitling nonintersex voices to determine the “real” meaning of their bodies and lives. As Koch explains, *intersex* was coined in 1916 by German zoologist and geneticist Richard Goldschmidt in his work on the sex-determination of moths. This quickly became the term of choice within medico-scientific discourse, and given the hegemonic effect of John Money’s medical protocols, all talk of intersex remained largely confined within this discourse through

much of the twentieth century. This changed with the 2002 publication and commercial success of the novel *Middlesex* (179–80). Koch skillfully argues that though *Middlesex* protagonist Callie/Cal is situated within the prevailing medical discourse and thus depicted as intersex, Eugenides interweaves allusions to Ovid’s myth of Hermaphroditus. As a result, just as the “unequivocally male” authorial and editorial voices of *Maiden Years* are the final arbiters of Nora/Norbert’s life story, so too the story of the first and most widely known intersex protagonist ends up being a “story about a hermaphrodite . . . written by a white heterosexual man who is neither intersex nor a medical doctor” (215). Koch’s analysis thus amplifies the ambivalence expressed by intersex activists toward the novel. On the one hand, it increased public awareness about “intersex.” On the other, its dominance within the public imaginary silenced and misrepresented the life stories of actual intersex people (194).

A second theme is weighing the costs and benefits of adopting a compromised subject position in an effort to mitigate the harms caused by institutions authorized with determining and enforcing “normal” sex, gender, and sexual identities. In part I, Koch shows how Babin and Body (aka Baer) adopt and accept the designation “male” or “female” in order to maintain long-term intimate and erotic relationships by having them deemed “normal” by ecclesial, judicial, and medical authorities tasked with enforcing heteronormative identities. In part II, Koch argues that Chase, founder of ISNA, adopts a “strategic essentialism” with respect to intersex identity for the purpose of preventing the harms caused by the Money protocols. On Koch’s telling, Chase elicited and publicized testimonials of actual intersex patients to challenge the authority of scholarly medical discourse as the sole source of truth about a patient’s lived experience and ensure a “normal” identity. This was effective insofar as it led to reassessing and revising the protocols in 2005. That said, many intersex activists and allies, including former ISNA members, have been highly critical of Chase’s strategic moves. They fault Chase for treating intersex as a uniform, essentialized identity and presuming to speak as the representative voice for this identity. They charge Chase with betrayal for accepting the pathologized term *disorder of sex development* as a reasonable substitute for *intersex* and for distancing ISNA from its former alliance with trans* activists. Koch is keenly aware of these criticisms and even underwrites them in her fifth and final snapshot of Hillman’s work. Because of its sensitive close reading of the discursive context, I strongly recommend reading Koch’s charitable account of Chase’s strategy and the use of intersex testimonials as a justified means of community-building and a politically efficacious, emancipatory move toward reclaiming the trauma inflicted by a heteronormative binary system (cf. 170–71).

The third theme, and a primary one for Koch, is celebrating the plural, localized, intersecting, and indeterminate features of the texts and fields surrounding *intersex* and *hermaphroditism*. The hope and joy she takes in these features is evident in the analysis of Hillman’s *Better Word*. Koch draws on the work of queer theorist Eve Sedgwick to show how Hillman’s “technique of naming and telling something and taking it back or questioning it” functions as an act of protest and public shaming capable of effecting broad-scale change (219). Chase adopts strategic essentialism and effects change within medical discourse but leaves the public imaginary largely unaltered. By contrast, Hillman reports questioning Chase’s and other intersex activists’ efforts to define *intersex* and to police the language used to tell her own story. For Koch, *Better Word* is representative of contemporary texts where “intersex is no longer restricted to mythical, medical, or activist settings or discourses, but is installed as a subject position firmly grounded in the real world, simply put, an *inter-active subject*”

(253). In these texts, Koch sees the seeds of a “growing plurality of intersex in print and film” and the possibility of enlarging imaginations beyond the confines of the binary. I am grateful to Koch’s *Discursive Intersexions* for having renewed my hope in this possibility.

I recommend the book to anyone frustrated by the resilience of the heteronormative binary system, despite long-standing activist and academic efforts that show the epistemic and ethical inadequacies of this system and its resultant harms. Using tools of Foucauldian discourse analysis, Koch provides a fine-grained diagnosis of why these efforts failed to achieve the higher-order structural changes toward which they aimed.³ For this reason and because Koch illustrates the need to supplement a strictly Foucauldian approach, I also recommend it for graduate-level courses in gender studies and methods of discourse analysis.

Notes

1 Koch invokes intersex scholar and activist Iain Morland’s “octopus-like” metaphor to describe this field. Morland is specifically referring to the resilient, polyphonic, and colonizing effect of the Western medicalized discourse throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. However, as Koch will go on to argue, so-called hermaphrodite memoirs and intersex testimonies have long resisted this medical hegemony. She concludes that, taken collectively, these texts undercut any effort to provide a determinate meaning of *hermaphroditism* or *intersex*, and this indeterminacy can be weaponized to teach and subdue “the octopus” (252).

2 Koch does not stress as much as she could the broad scope of the challenge Babin’s *Memoirs* poses to “prestigious” accounts. For evidence that Koch’s analysis demonstrates this broader scope, see where she states and subsequently shows how Babin’s *Memoirs* push back against Judith Butler’s and other scholarly accounts that read it as a performative, confessional act aimed at constructing the self and a presumably failed one at that (54–55). For the most part, Koch allows Babin and the text to speak for themselves. There were only a few places where I felt her own author-critic voice was used to supplant Babin’s (cf. 64).

3 For an insightful account of the resilience of systems perpetuating epistemic oppressions and the orders of change required for addressing these oppressions, see Dotson 2014.

References

- Dotson, Kristie. 2014. Conceptualizing epistemic oppression. *Social Epistemology* 28 (2): 115–38.
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