

Transgender Retro Review: Who put 'Drag Queen' in parenthesis?

BOOK REVIEW *The 'Drag Queen' Scene: The Transsexuals of Kings Cross (1983)*

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I own two copies of Roberta Perkins' book, *The 'Drag Queen' Scene*. The first copy was borrowed about twenty years ago from a friend, artist Michael Butler who has now passed away. This copy is a hardcover and was stolen by my friend from the Upper Murray Regional Library in the late 1980s, just a few years after its publication. Over the years this copy of the book has been widely used for research and as a resource for generations of students.

During World Pride I had Courtney Act sign it for me but regret not getting it signed by Carlotta who wrote her inscription in another book *Kings Cross Sydney: A personal look at the Cross* by Rennie Ellis and Wesley Stacey, published in 1971. This mix up was fortuitous as it blurs the line distinguishing drag queens from transsexuals, a concept that informs the basis of this essay.



Karen 1958 p.32

Aside from all the signs of having been well read during its life in regional Australia the book is missing several of its coloured illustrations. Images of some of the drag queens have been carefully torn out, including Karen in 1958 on page 32; Gina and Naomi on page 58 and Carmen on page 104. I really wanted to see the black and white photos of Carmen as there is a very rare image of her as a boy.

A few years ago I set out to acquire a second copy and realised that it had become a rare book and was expensive to buy. In end I acquired a second copy from a book wholesaler in Florida USA on Amazon Marketplace. The book was listed as an unused hardcover and priced at \$140. When the book arrived I discovered that it was a softcover and had a previous owner, bearing the name Dr Michael Ross, Flinders University. I soon discovered that he ran the The Flinders Medical Centre in Adelaide where he performed thirty gender reassignment surgeries from 1979 to 1988.

The book's narrative is structured around a series of interviews that were conducted between 1978 and 1981, while Perkins was completing a BA Honours degree in Sociology at Macquarie University. The result is a fine example of an academic thesis that was successfully published as a reference book. During the 1980s it was widely read by academics, medical practitioners, psychiatrists, researchers and anybody who had an interest in the complexities of gender and sexuality. Despite the book's impact it was never republished or revised as a second edition.

Perkins' 1983 publication presents an insiders view into the lives of twelve people that she describes as male-to-female transsexuals who live and work as showgirls, strippers, bar girls and prostitutes in Sydney's Kings Cross. There are three reasons why Perkins placed the words 'drag queen' in parenthesis as part of the book's title. The first involves the appropriation of a popular colloquial phrase with the aim of being gender inclusive. Secondly, the title works effectively as a marketing exercise, making it stand out, assisting with the book's sales and popularity. Thirdly, the use of parenthesis acknowledges a catch-all phrase that is both vernacular and regionally specific to Australia, in particular Oxford Street, Sydney.

Historians and theorists of transgender culture including Kate Bornstein, Susan Stryker and Julia Serano have simultaneously developed a fascination as well as an incredulity for the way drag has been conceived and operates in Sydney. On the one hand they have expressed admiration for the inclusive system that Perkins identified but seem perplexed with its unmade lack of resolution or specificity. In her writings Bornstein, for example didn't understand how a beautiful and feminine drag queen such as Doris Fish didn't go all the way.

Perkin's analysis stems from a close, intimate and tacit first-hand experience of what she describes as a glimpse into a enclosed subculture. Even today the root cause of the prejudice transgender people face revolves around the idea that for many people transgender people don't exist at all. Retrospectively the title of the book is quite nostalgic as it looks backwards to an Australia of the 1960s yet its method of analysis, research and bibliography reveals a glimpse into contemporary cultural theory.

For American academics the colloquial nomenclature used in Sydney must be as fascinating and as it is perplexing. For Perkins words like 'tranny' or better still 'trany' have the potential to be interpreted positively as a catch-all phrase for inclusivity, yet their negative connotations as examples of lazy and semi-illiterate Australian slang have the effect of reducing a spectrum of cultures into a stereotype. This is why terminology and definitions used to describe gender diversity remains problematic. Oxford Street has been and still is a place where its inhabitants are obliged to perform competently across a range of activities in order to survive. Perkin's emphasis on performativity, in other words the concept of gender mobility predates Judith Butler's idea of 'gender trouble' by a decade.



Stephen 'Hair killed my drag life.' p.87

the interviewees the term 'drag queen' was seen as being positive in contrast to many other colloquial and slang terms in use at the time.

After forty years *The 'Drag Queen' Scene* remains a confronting read, as it documents the genesis of a subculture while being structured as an objective, if not anthropological analysis. Stylistically the book is an enigma as it combines academic research with other genres including documentary, biography, crime and horror. Published at exactly the moment when the news of HIV and AIDS was breaking, Perkin's little red book provides value to a culture that was viewed as being disposable and not worth recording. *The 'Drag Queen' Scene* remains a users guide for survival by creating a cultural framework transcending a life lived on the streets.

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