

Book reviews

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Jane Bennett and Charmaine Pereira, eds. 2013. *Jacketed women: Qualitative research methodologies on sexualities and gender in Africa*. Claremont: UCT Press. ISBN: 978-1091989-558-1.

Do gender researchers approach their subjects differently from the way other researchers approach theirs? Should they conduct their research according to particular ethics and methodologies? These questions have been discussed for decades by scholars such as Sandra Harding, Liz Stanley, Linda Alcoff, Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Spivak. The general consensus, which is appropriate for the postmodern academic landscape where decentralisation and micro-knowledge are the order of the day, is that gender research should, itself, be gendered. One of the most important working principles of research into gender is that it should not ‘speak for’ the research subjects. A more appropriate position for enunciation is, in Trinh T. Minh-ha’s words, speaking ‘next to’ or ‘adjacently to’ those who are being researched. This involves the researcher placing him/herself on an equal plane of enunciation with the subjects of research and enabling those subjects to be heard equally or perhaps heard even more loudly than the voice of the researcher.

This, then, is the playing field where *Jacketed women* belongs. Editors Jane Bennett and Charmaine Pereira do not engage in their introduction with the topic of voice, besides noticing (p. 2) that ‘there is a classic (by now) tradition of research orientation, which works at/on the meaning of “voice” and the politics of privilege and location’. The matter of speaking is more dramatically examined in Bennett’s final chapter in the book, through the example of Khwezi’s ‘speech’ against Zuma in the now-infamous rape trial. When opening the volume, Bennett and Pereira pay careful attention to the politics of location of the researcher, who, they note, is frequently occupying ‘gendered and sexual identities’ and the appropriate ways of dealing, in research, with matters such as talk, sexuality and cultural translation. It is possible that they omitted comment on the matter of speaking for and to the subjects of research, because they believe this to be a debate whose outlines are so well known that it does not bear repeating. This omission, however, becomes symptomatic of a slight limitation on the book’s market: it is noticeably pitched more at the specialist scholar than at the beginner researcher.

In this context, *Jacketed women* offers an array of essays and articles that exemplify research into gender in the African context. These are beautifully punctuated by Zanele Muholi’s evocative

photographs of African women, drawn from her anthology, *Faces and phases* (2010). The photographs become bookmarks, indicating shifts in research topics. Taken together, the essays cover some of the most important sub-fields of research into gender: widow inheritance, sexual misconduct, lesbian marriage, abortion and teenage pregnancy. Each essay both performs and reflects on the appropriate research methodology for approaching the topic. Karabo Mohlakoana-Mosala's essay offers a highly self-reflexive discussion of the challenges of research into gender. Mohlakoana-Mosala begins by locating herself through her own journey as a developing researcher with an interest in teenage pregnancy. She makes the crucial point that

[n]arrating my 'research' thus involves rethinking my life, moving between and across different periods of time, and this kind of movement suggests that my past is tied quite closely to the steps taken to conduct the study on sexuality, as well as to the way that that research unfolded as a process. (p. 24)

She is also, crucially, the originator of the book's title: a 'jacketed' woman in the religious context of Lesotho is one who has earned a special position of privilege. The title therefore speaks to the position of privilege occupied by gender researchers. Bennett and Pereira explain:

'[J]acketed' women [are] honoured and privileged by access to education and resources, and by the way in which others perceived us as 'good' women. Our 'jackets' could also affect our intellectual and imaginative selves, organise our bodies and minds in ways which sat awkwardly with our own aspirations and dreams (p. 3).

Wearing the 'jacket' of a feminist researcher, they argue, entails navigating and negotiating between existential and personal difficulties with honest self-reflection; it also involves focusing as much explicit attention on the processes of research as on its findings.

Conspicuously, the researchers whose work is collected in *Jacketed women* are all women and they are all involved in research into women, despite the volume's title as a collection of research into 'gender and sexuality'. The absence of research into masculinities is an aspect that could have been productively addressed from a number of possible scholarly and theoretical angles. For example, it can be argued that the people who most keenly experience gender dynamics are women (especially in the context of such practices as widow inheritance and HIV/AIDS care). Seen from this perspective, the people who 'have' gender, for whom gender is visible as an axis of identity, are women rather than men. Nevertheless, this does not detract from an outstanding collection of scholarly and ethical research into the state(s) of gender research practice in southern Africa. Students and more established researchers alike will find much to learn from this excellent volume.