

Book reviews

Kendall Petersen

Department of Afrikaans and Theory of Literature
University of South Africa
peterkkw@unisa.ac.za

Andrew Cooper. *Changing gay male identities*. 2013. UK, USA, Canada: Routledge. ISBN: 978-0-415-64374-0 (hbk), ISBN: 978-0-203-08003-0 (ebk). The book, which is number 99 in the Routledge *Advances in Sociology* series, is available from Book Promotions – a division of Jonathan Ball Publishers.

Have we entered the era of the ‘post gay’? Has the ‘original’ gay identity category been watered down by modernity? With the spectrum of sexual identities broadening and expanding at an undeniably significant rate, has ‘gay’ been diluted to a generic and amorphous category which is making the construction and maintenance of sexual identity difficult ‘hard labour’? (p. 3). These questions provided the impetus for the research presented in *Changing gay male identities*, which explores the challenges involved in constructing and maintaining personal and sexual identities through the narratives of 21 gay men in England and Scotland.

According to Andrew Cooper, due to the fact that the range of expression for sexual identities and intimate relationships is expanding so rapidly, identities are in flux, and traditional or conventional models of identity and intimacy are consequently being eroded. The author suggests that the scope of this range of expression be controlled and that identity itself be re-examined in order to assess its relevance today. He explores this through interviews conducted with 21 gay men, attempting to establish what roles personal and social identity play in the lives of gay men. The negotiation of these identities is examined within four broad themes or areas, namely

- gay identity and body politics
- interpersonal/intimate and social relationships
- the performance of identity in everyday life
- the reconciliation of often opposing views such as religion and sexuality. (p. 158)

Cooper conducted interviews across a relatively broad demographic range; interviewees were aged between 27 and 61, and were blacks, whites, Greeks or Asians from England and Scotland. The men largely self-identified as gay, while one self-identified as queer. Cooper explains that attempts were made at recruiting a large and diverse sample, which necessitated the need to think beyond ‘merely’ gay, and to include a range of sexual expressions.

The research explores the notion that factors such as the increased diversification of sexual identities, the effects of modernisation, as well as the increased visibility of gay rights ultimately threaten the loss of the homosexual (p. 3). Cooper cites research that suggests, for example, that HIV/AIDS has had a significant impact on the negotiation of sexual identity, particularly for gay men. On the one hand it inspires the need for gay men to manifest qualities which actively oppose or contradict the image of illness and physical decay associated with the epidemic, encouraging instead the pursuit of images of masculinity predicated on the notion of “muscularity”, “virility”, and the desire to look healthy’ (p. 6). On the other hand, gay male sexual identities have also been strengthened in that the epidemic encourages a return to the community as site of identification and solidarity – strength in numbers in a time of adversity.

From the onset it must be noted that Cooper geographically locates his study in the United Kingdom (UK), which could be seen as effectively limiting the scope of the research, because while the research is highly relevant, it is also ultimately very site- or context-specific, which could limit the applicability. The negotiation of gender identity is informed by several factors (including geography), which means that a great portion of the relevance of this study will be limited to the geographical context of the UK. This is not merely about the construction of gay male identity, but also about gay male identity *in* the UK. This is, of course, understandable given that the negotiation of gay male sexual identity on a global scale would constitute a project or undertaking which would simply be too large for one person.

What is also important to note is the structure of the text itself. In his research, Cooper sets out to establish the ways in which gay men (again, limited to those in the study) ‘negotiate their sense of self’ (p. 9). During the course of his interviews with the 21 gay men he was able to identify two forms of identity, namely

- ‘fortress identities’ which, as implied by the name, suggests an identity based on the idea of resistance to or defense against various social onslaughts; and
- ‘sticky identities’, which refers to the various components gay men seek to reconcile, such as sexuality and religion, for example.

Cooper places distinct emphasis on the importance of ‘identity work’ in the process of identity negotiation and construction. This concept refers to the difficulties gay men encounter in the process of establishing a coherent sense of self, particularly within a context which sees the process being hindered by numerous obstacles (p. 10).

While the premise of the research is the effect of globalisation, mass communication, and rapid and constant advances in technology on the negotiation and maintenance of identity, or a stable sense of self, the author is able to draw on the personal narratives of the men interviewed, to establish how they have (if at all) negotiated their personal and sexual identities. In his examination of these interviews, Cooper is able to identify the sites of intersection of dynamics such as gender, sex, camp, class, race and ethnicity.

What emerges from the interviews is a distinct awareness of identity. For example, the interviewees displayed an acute self-awareness, and were cognizant of the extent to which

their identity was informed by factors such as their families and communities. This awareness facilitates or enables an active negotiation of identity or ‘identity work’, in that the men recognise the importance of maintaining a coherent sense of self and an independent identity – particularly a sexual identity on the one hand, while on the other hand acknowledging the importance and relevance of certain qualities inherent to the communities in which they are located. It is precisely this element of personal identity negotiation which will resonate with readers, particularly those from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community, including those outside of the UK, who will be able to identify with several of the personal life stories. That said, the work focuses on the negotiation of gay male sexual identity, and for that reason, while it will be of interest to students of gender studies, queer studies and LGBT studies, the exclusion of a female case study group might be distinctly limiting.