

Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes

Don Kulick

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) ➔

Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes

Don Kulick

Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes Don Kulick

In this dramatic and compelling narrative, anthropologist Don Kulick follows the lives of a group of transgendered prostitutes (called *travestis* in Portuguese) in the Brazilian city Salvador. *Travestis* are males who, often beginning at ages as young as ten, adopt female names, clothing styles, hairstyles, and linguistic pronouns. More dramatically, they ingest massive doses of female hormones and inject up to twenty liters of industrial silicone into their bodies to create breasts, wide hips, and large thighs and buttocks. Despite such irreversible physiological changes, virtually no *travesti* identifies herself as a woman. Moreover, *travestis* regard any male who does so as mentally disturbed.

Kulick analyzes the various ways *travestis* modify their bodies, explores the motivations that lead them to choose this particular gendered identity, and examines the complex relationships that they maintain with one another, their boyfriends, and their families. Kulick also looks at how *travestis* earn their living through prostitution and discusses the reasons prostitution, for most *travestis*, is a positive and affirmative experience.

Arguing that transgenderism never occurs in a "natural" or arbitrary form, Kulick shows how it is created in specific social contexts and assumes specific social forms. Furthermore, Kulick suggests that *travestis*—far from deviating from normative gendered expectations—may in fact distill and perfect the messages that give meaning to gender throughout Brazilian society and possibly throughout much of Latin America.

Through Kulick's engaging voice and sharp analysis, this elegantly rendered account is not only a landmark study in its discipline but also a fascinating read for anyone interested in sexuality and gender.

Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes Details


Date : Published November 15th 1998 by University of Chicago Press (first published 1998)

ISBN : 9780226461007

Author : Don Kulick

Format : Paperback 277 pages

Genre : Anthropology, Nonfiction, Gender, Sexuality, Academic, School, Ethnography

 [Download Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Tran ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Tr ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes Don Kulick

From Reader Review *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes* for online ebook

Keshia Driscoll-Cook says

What a great book to read. Very different than other ethnographies that I have read. I was assigned to read this book in a class I took at my university. I found myself really connecting with the individuals in the book just like I would if I was reading a novel. I rooted for them and felt despair for them just like any other story. I think Mr. Kulick did a wonderful job studying this culture and really enjoyed his work.

thinker bell says

Gave pretty clear context of what Salvador is like in terms of how the city socially accepts to some point transvestis compared to surrounding areas in NE part of Brasil. Very similar conditions to the US.

Emily Waters says

As an anthropologist with an interest in sex and gender studies, this was both a great read educationally as well as academically. The stories were both entertaining and eye-opening. An added bonus was when I remarked to my grad school advisor that I had read the book and she called me a geek.

Nicole says

Honestly one of the most eye opening books on sex and gender.

Megan says

I may just be lucking out with the anthropological books that I read, but each one has been amazing, *Travesti* by Don Kulick being no exception. The nuances of sex and gender are usually unknown to the common American, and the differences between the "trans" words, like transgender, transexual, and transvestite are oftentimes confused. In this book Don sheds light on a subculture of transgendered individuals who challenge even the basic understandings that we have on gender, and what he presents is written in an entirely approachable, rich way.

I'm sure many people would think that anthropological books, which are supposed to present facts and statistics, are dry, boring reads. After reading *Travesti*, I can say that Don presents the information he gathered through his extended time living with the Travesti of Brazil in a way not unlike an educated conversation with a friend. All of the facts that he gathered with the help of a Travesti acting as his translator and assistant are interesting, illuminating, and written in a way that someone without a background in anthropology would understand. One of the most interesting facets of this book are the transcribed

conversations he's had with some travesti, and the pictures that he took during his stay.

So what is a Travesti, exactly? Don explains that it is a biological male who has always identified with feminine things, like makeup, dolls, and wanting to be desired by boys. They usually have erotic encounters with their male playmates as children, and after being penetrated, often move away from their judgmental homes to a big city that has a Travesti population. The biggest key to understanding a Travesti is that they are men who make themselves appear as females, so that they can obtain the sexual attention of heterosexual men. In one interview with Don, a Travesti explains that they understand they are male by biological definition, that God made them this way, but that they are only expanding upon his creation to "better" it (they make it very clear that they believe any male who thinks he is a female inside is mentally disturbed and should seek help). This female performance extends to growing out their hair, wearing feminine clothes, taking hormones, and getting silicone injections to make their hips, butts, and breasts larger and more feminine -- something that can easily baffle someone who hasn't had much exposure to the variety of gender and identity. Travesti are not "men who feel that they are really a female inside," but men who only want to appear feminine to match the needs of the men they are attracted to. Heterosexual men find women attractive, therefore Travesti make themselves appear female.

One thing to understand when going into this book is that the culture you come from is not the "right" culture. Cultures vary, and there is no "right" or "wrong" way to do things. Don presents the Travesti world from an insider's perspective, a way in which not many would be able to achieve. He was accepted into their lives and in return, he received a front row seat to their daily lives, their cares, worries, methods, and desires. Even the Brazilians, who are very conscious of the existence of Travesti, often speak of the subculture incorrectly.

Overall, this book is a fascinating read for those of an open and curious mind. I thoroughly enjoyed it, though caution potential readers to the fact that there is much frank talk. The information presented here is a "raw" look into a very real culture, and there is no beating around the bush with the facts.

Judah says

Though I was intrigued when I came across this book, I felt a little apprehensive, largely because of some hang-ups I've come to have about the concept on ethnography in general. I knew that I was going into the experience of reading this book with a sort of voyeuristic awe at the shock value I perceived to be conveyed by the cover and title. My feelings of guilt were further solidified as I eagerly marveled over the descriptions of travestis injecting themselves with industrial silicone and attempting to win over macho vicios with money and gifts. As I continued reading, though, I was impressed by the author's ability to contextualize these behaviors and thus offer a humanizing, 3-dimensional portrait of a very stigmatized portion of the Brazilian population. Kulick explores the deeper meanings implied by the various measures travestis take in their desire to feminize themselves, and what that desire implies about the gender stereotypes and rigid, patriarchal social norms that actually encourage a male homosexual to transform into a travesti.

This is definitely a new favorite. Although the writing is a little academic at times, it's mostly really accessible and written in a very lively, colorful style that encourages readers to feel attached to the travestis telling their stories.

Alex Cunningham says

Kulick's honesty is probably the thing that makes this not just an anthropological tract but an excellent piece of non-fiction writing. Kulick is honest with the travesti with whom he lives, and he's honest with us about his life and how it might affect his perspective on the unusual situation in which he's placed himself. He writes with a maturity and understanding that gives him something better than social-scientific objectivity: the awareness of the inevitable subjectivity of his perspective. The stories he has to tell here in this sometimes shocking book are brash and bold and cast a big shadow. In that shadow is Kulick's own story, which feels just as interesting.

Keshia says

A fun and interesting read about Brazilian transgendered prostitutes that was completely unexpected. I assumed this book would be a completely factual re-encounter of Kulick's fieldwork in Brazil. What I unexpectedly discovered after the first couple of pages that this was not just factual it was caring, genuine and a light-hearted memoir of the unheard voices of these under privileged, under loved and sometimes hated people. Kulick noted throughout this book that previous studies on Travesti's were not done from the first person perspective, rather academics always took the "outside looking in" approach leaving holes in their ethnological reports.

Kulick lived with these people for many months, among the same living quarters, took the time to learn their language, walked with them on the streets, oversaw their practices of injecting silicone into their bodies to make themselves more feminine and the entire time made it completely empathetic and caring.

I enjoyed hearing the back-stories to some of the Travesti's and found that their upbringings and childhood sexual encounters were not what I would expect to see in an American setting. As adults he provided an in depth look into their relationships with men who are considered "not homosexual" by the public. He did not group the Travesti's like so many would assume they should be grouped into "they want to be women" but rather gave a serious personal perspective of these people on why they feel they are NOT women, nor do they want to be.

This was fascinating not only to read about such a complex sub-culture but also because you can really tell the author cared about the people he was portraying. While reading this I was sad during the hard times, laughed at the spunky attitudes of the Travesti's, shocked at some of their rituals and amazed that the entire time Kulick was there by their side as a friend and not just somebody trying to record their way of life. Wonderful!

Dana says

Don Kulick does a wonderful job of integrating himself into the travesti community, and presenting information in a non-judgmental manner. His fieldwork seems to be lacking in diversity.

Kate says

This is a really nicely balanced and respectful ethnography of a fascinating subculture in Brazil. I only wish the author had continued to embrace the subjects' own embodied paradox rather than trying to fit them into a concrete framework at the end, although he did it in an innovative and believable way.

Isabel Wittmann says

Muito interessante ver a visão de um antropólogo sueco sobre uma realidade de vivências trans que ele afirma serem praticamente exclusivas do Brasil: as travestis. Chamando o país de "uma sociedade de violência", após viver 8 meses com 13 travestis em Salvador, relata as vivências delas em meio à ojeriza de uma sociedade que não só as colocam à margem, mas as agredem fisicamente de maneira cotidiana. Com uma escrita fluida e sem grandes discussões teóricas, o livro passa a sensação de que estamos lendo um romance ou um relato, que nos carrega para a intimidade das suas personagens. Provavelmente o maior problema da obra seja justamente a falta de discussão sobre questões de gênero e sobre o que significa ser travesti nesse contexto. Autores e citações são problematizados literalmente nas últimas 15 páginas. Mas isso não diminui em nada a riqueza da obra.

Andrea says

I read this one for school and it was definitely one of the more interesting anthropology books I've read. I'd never heard of this subculture before and it was interesting to learn about. Some parts were a bit slow but I enjoyed most of it.

Michael Mena says

I give this book 5 stars because of its ease to read, although it will not be enjoyable for many readers as there is plenty of sex-talk, police torture stories, and pictures of backroom silicone injections (amongst other things). The astute reader, however, will appreciate the early emergence of the 'desire' paradigm, which is explicitly not about 'identity' and 'agency', offered by Kulick and Cameron a bit later. I think the book might be shocking to North American readers, despite Kulick's claim to avoid sensationalization. I had to ask myself constantly, "is this ****actually**** shocking in the Brazilian Travesti context, or only in my context while I sit in a nice apartment that has A/C (and no cockroach infestation, which are mentioned a couple times) in New York?"

Bram says

Brazilians, on the rare occasions that they speak positively of travestis, those renowned gender-defying generators of much lurid modern folklore and commentary, will celebrate them as a particularly visible

representation of societal inversion. While the nation relishes its alleged Carnival-esque ability to undermine and overcome its strict Roman Catholic heritage, Kulick suggests that travestis *reinforce* rather than invert the traditional cultural views on sex and gender. In his judgment, travestis should not be seen as an archetypal aberration, a distortional transcending of traditional norms that might be pointed to as an illustration of the exemplary paradoxical nature of Brazilian culture. Instead, he demonstrates how travesti life is consistent with and elaborative of the “particular configurations of sexuality, gender, and sex that undergird and give meaning to Brazilian notions of ‘man’ and ‘woman’”. Kulick’s major goal for this ethnography, then, is to answer this early-posed question: “What do travesti practices tell us about the ways in which gender is imagined and configured in Brazilian society?”

In satisfying this undertaking, Kulick is remarkably successful. Throughout the course of the ethnography, Kulick explores the construction of gender in greater Brazil through the experiential understanding of travestis. The gender of travestis themselves is decidedly female, but not for reasons of self-identification. Rather, this assessment is based on the act of sexual penetration, which “constitutes the interpretative framework that [travestis] draw on in order to be and to act, and in order to understand the being and action of others”. The penetrator/ penetrated dichotomy that carries so much importance for travestis is also fundamental to understanding gender in broader Brazilian society. As Kulick establishes, the penetrator is male and is generally considered heterosexual regardless of the sex of the person he is penetrating; the penetrated is thus female. While travestis are sometimes paid to penetrate clients, they never maintain relationships with boyfriends who want to be penetrated. These boyfriends are, by definition, no longer men because it is the sexual *behavior* that ultimately determines gender.

Kulick is not only interested in the ways in which travestis represent and crystallize gender and sex in Brazilian culture, however. He also seeks, in one of the most compelling aspects of the book, to explicate a people who have rarely (if ever) been accurately or fairly characterized in popular or anthropological studies. Travestis, despite their occasional glorification in popular culture or in the form of a particularly beautiful model (Roberta Close), are “one of the most marginalized, feared, and despised groups in Brazilian society”. They are frequently portrayed in the media as crazed, violent, and depraved. Kulick humanizes them, removing the sense of ‘otherness’ that is insurmountable for many. For example, he explains that religion is often important in travesti life: alters with a mix of Roman Catholic and Candomblé paintings and figures are positioned alongside pornography in their small apartments. Travestis remain impressively dedicated to their mothers, often saving up money to buy them a house even if relations have long been strained due to lack of acceptance of the travesti’s life and personal expression. Travestis date men, the overwhelming majority of whom are heterosexual in the Brazilian societal context, and as with their non-travesti counterparts, these relationships take up a good deal of their time, money, and energy.

After providing a background and context for the life of travestis in the large, unglamorous city of Salvador, Kulick explores Turnerian rites of passage in intimate detail. The reader is guided through the future travesti’s first childhood sexual encounter with a boy or a man, to whom the future travesti ‘gives’ (is penetrated) either orally or anally, and the commencement of prostitution which usually (though not always) coincides with the time at which the travesti begins dressing and arranging herself as a woman. The next rite of passage, in which the travesti begins to move from the liminal phase into full incorporation, is the process of ingesting exceptionally large doses of hormones, a practice often continued in spite of debilitating side effects. But most important, if only because the changes are irreversible, is the final travesti rite of passage: the injection of silicone. Kulick allocates no small amount of space to the Brazilian obsession with the female *bunda*—the ass. The ideal *bunda* is large and connected to conspicuous hips. Hormones, while helpful in filling out small breasts, feminizing the face, and decreasing body/facial hair, are powerless to provide an irresistible *bunda*. Thus, more drastic measures must be taken: the injection of industrial silicone directly into the soft tissue.

While this injection process, along with excessive hormone intake, can have deleterious health effects, and despite the fact that travestis *do* worry about these outcomes, they almost universally opt to be ‘pumped’. Because of the health dangers, the risks of failure (e.g. formation of an ill-shaped *bunda*), and the permanent effects of the process, it is with silicone injection that the power of the Durkheimian collective ritual is most clear. This is where the travesti commitment, her belief in the ideals of the travesti community, lead to a true sense of belonging. Since travestis seek to ‘perfect’ themselves as women and because the creation of an impressive *bunda* is the best means of doing so, silicone injection becomes a defining aspect of socialization: “Travestis all know exactly how much silicone other travestis have in their bodies, where they have it, when it was injected, by whom, and in what city”. Silicone is considered a “miraculous product” and is a “continual topic of conversation and commentary”, providing ample opportunity for compliment and criticism.

In a book full of fascinating anecdotes and nuanced insights, perhaps the most intriguing aspect is the revelation that travestis do *not* consider themselves to be women. Not only that, but they believe that anyone born as a man (i.e. with a penis) who identifies as a woman—let alone someone who considers removing and exchanging his/her genitals—is “suffering from a psychosis”. The belief system is surprising in that it runs directly counter to the prevailing American/European transgender belief that the gender one feels oneself to be is one’s *true* gender, and any subsequent physical changes made to conform to this feeling are irrelevant. In other words, one need not ‘transition’ from male-to-female or female-to-male cosmetically, hormonally, or surgically to be considered one’s deep-felt gender. As discussed above, however, gender for travestis and all Brazilians is ultimately determined by sexual behavior, a criterion that American/European transgender individuals would consider extraneous to their identity.

Somewhat less surprising, perhaps because it is made at a later stage in the book after having been hinted at in many other places, is the argument that travestis enjoy their sex work. It is not only the primary source of income, but also “a source of pleasurable and reaffirming experiences”. While it is true that travestis are often unable to hold down other jobs due to discrimination and a lack of legal protection, Kulick rejects the notion that the inevitability of travesti prostitution implies that it is necessarily demeaning, unenjoyable, and exploitative. This is not an easy argument to make, and to his credit, Kulick does an admirable job. But given the travestis’ lack of alternative options and because of the poverty that is always threatening, his conclusions seem problematic. Even if there are periods of joy, pleasure, and financial success, there are also many moments of police harassment, violent scraps, and robberies. By highlighting the positive aspects of prostitution and neutralizing some of the negative ones, specifically when describing situations in which the travesti is the thief and/or mugger, Kulick gives the impression that this type of scenario is less morally objectionable because of the inversion of the role of victim from prostitute to client.

While Kulick is correct to cast doubt on many historical anthropological views of prostitution as something that is *inherently* degrading and unpleasurable, he also seems overly-willing to grant weight to scenarios that appear to be exceptional or at least irregular. Travestis speak positively about being “admired”, “praised”, “applauded”, and “fulfilled” (in bed) by men—to be made “to feel like a woman”—usually in discussions of their relationships with boyfriends. And while these feelings can also be summoned in sex work scenarios, the stories that Kulick quotes give the impression of being memorable for their exquisitely rendered and remembered details—in other words, these are the exceptions that help make the rule more bearable. Kulick does not indicate whether he believes prostitution is an essential part of being a travesti, or, to approach it from another angle, if there could be a travesti future *without* prostitution.

Kulick also believes that his status as a gay man offered him a privileged glimpse of travesti life not as easily available to either straight men or to women. He notes that, when joining groups of travestis who were unknown to him, they “often nodded and relaxed noticeably” upon receiving an affirmative answer that he

was also a *viado* ('fag'). While his successes in befriending travestis and engaging in dialogue with them on any number of intimate and explicit topics might suggest his assumption of privilege was correct, he implicitly slights anthropologists of different orientation and gender, as well as the travestis themselves, in making this suggestion. It is particularly ironic that Kulick employs the same condescension here as those he chides in the introduction—the only two people he knew who had conducted ethnographic work with transgender people in Latin America. These two women “expressed doubts that [Kulick], as a man, would ever be able to gain access to and acceptance by travestis”. Kulick is giving neither travestis nor non-gay men enough credit if he believes that travestis would no longer feel comfortable “conversing about the topics—boyfriends, clients, big penises, hormones, and silicone—that most occupy their time” around other (non-gay male) anthropologists in his position. As a straight man who lived on the road for two months with two dozen gay and transgender activists, I am acutely aware of how being straight and male can initially lead to guardedness and apprehension on the part of those accustomed to abuse from members of my demographic. And I am just as aware that with time, time that any anthropologist in Kulick’s position would have, any barriers of the type mentioned by him are easily overcome with good will and genuine non-judgmental interest.

Such a minor criticism, however, should not deter anyone from seeking out this ethnography. Indeed, Kulick most often strikes just the right tone, one of outsider detachment that does not falsely belie his close friendships with the travestis who figure prominently in the narrative. His contribution and especially the challenges he poses to prevailing Western views of how the body figures in notions of gender and transgenderism are significant, particularly in regards to how sex practices can trump other considerations in defining gender. Most importantly, perhaps, Kulick’s blunt directness in describing daily travesti life and concerns, and his refusal to shy away from any bodily or sexual topic, brings travestis out of the tabloids and into the mundane realm of flesh and blood. If travestis are eventually to be viewed more favorably in Brazil, this will be due in no small part to the work of Kulick in exposing some gritty truths and debunking the flashy myths—in short, to have ‘de-othered’ travestis for those who may now recognize them as a people firmly rooted in Brazilian cultural conceptions of sexuality, gender, and sexual practices.

Meghan says

I had to read this book for my Sex and Culture class this semester, and unlike some books I've had to read for Anthropology classes this wasn't dry, it was actually really well written and very interesting. You get a feel for the travestis and the life they lead everyday, and while they say how happy they are and how much they love what they do, you still can't help but feel for them in some way. Whether it's how they have boyfriends who will pretty much only stick around as long as the goods and cash keep flowing, family that will have nothing to do with them if the travesti cannot supply them with goods and cash as well, to all the problems they face due to harassment.

Getting to read about Kulick's experiences in staying with and getting to these women in Brazil sheds quite a bit of light on not only a subculture of Salvador, but also on the culture itself in all the ways that travestis in a sense adhere to certain aspects of a moral code that that of the dominant culture does as well. Such as with their views on changing ones sex, to homosexual couples (mind you, they're homosexual, but their boyfriends are heterosexual), what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman.

I'd highly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in anthropology, gender studies, and anything of the like.
