

Transformations: Identity Construction in Contemporary Culture.* Grant McCracken. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. 464 pp.

Reviewed by Orvar Löfgren

Sometimes it can be mentally exhausting to read about a postmodern world in constant flux and transformation, where everything solid melts down and nothing stays the same. New identities are being tried on or discarded like pieces of clothing, anything is possible. In this popular genre contemporary history is often described in terms of an ever-increasing individualism and a constant fragmentation of social life.

Grant McCracken's new book *Transformations: Identity Construction in Contemporary Culture* inscribes itself in this tradition of grand narratives about "Where Contemporary Society is Heading." His aim is to study transformational routines, by which he means "the set of conventions by which an individual is changed" (p. xxii). This study of self-reinvention in modern times is backed up with a discussion of changing practices in transformative rituals. McCracken operates with stages of development, organized in four chapters called "Traditional Transformations," "Status Transformations," "Modern Transformations," and "Postmodern Transformations." He draws on a rich material of earlier studies, popular culture, TV-shows and Hollywood movies, blogs, magazine interviews, and bits and pieces of ethnography. It is very much a bricolage approach. We are moving through history and different contemporary contexts at full speed. Hold on, you never know what's waiting around the corner.

In many ways this is an entertaining book, taking the reader through a rich world of examples and situations. The basic idea to reflect on different forms of ritual transformations of personhood in history in order to grasp the present is good. My trouble is mainly that the book is trapped in a genre that feels tired. You are reminded of this right from the start. The preface is titled "Entertainment is Dead, Long Live Transformation" and thus signals that it is a book in "the cultural watershed tradition." Yesterday we lived a different life; right now there are new rules, rituals, and world views. He concludes by asking if "we are witnessing the creation of a global self and an expansionary individualism...mobile in its incorporation of diverse and improbable materials, adroit in its embrace of several at once, skillful in managing the portfolio of selves that is the result" (p. 293).

In this watershed genre you first have to set up a strawman and then burn it, with the help of a lot of footnotes. Entertainment is dead McCracken writes "it marks the place where once there was a useful idea" (p. xi). Las Vegas is just a dinosaur, today everybody can create their own entertainment with themselves as star performers. Instead of the old entertainment industries we have entered the world of personal transformations.

McCracken's present style of writing has unfortunately moved towards the tradition of management consultants' handbooks and airport literature. Watch out, do you still live and think according to the old order? Wake up and face the New Economy, the Experience Market, or the

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New, New Economy. Maybe I am over-sensitive to this genre. Why can I not just lean back and enjoy his roller-coaster ride through history, media, and contemporary (mainly American) life?

The reason is that I think McCracken could have written a much better book, more reflective, balanced, and less hurried. I start longing for counter-arguments and a much more engaged dialogue with the rich anthropological theory on rituals. In the flood of examples there is rarely time for contextualization; for example to discuss what's so American about the world of Cher, Martha Stewart, and Madonna? People can experiment with life-styles and marketing is happy to underline that a new hairstyle, a redecorated kitchen, or a romantic vacation can transform your life. This is of course what we all dream of from time to time. But behind the colorful façade of life-styles or role playing there is the stubborn durability of life-modes and everyday conditions of living—for example, in a class society.

With its total absence of a class perspective, the book comes to generalize what is very much a middle class world view, where change is seen as a constant condition and virtue, a tradition so elegantly analyzed in Adrie Kusserow's classic ethnography *American Individualisms* (2004). Don't get stuck, be on the move! In this process the constant urge for ritual transformations and personal makeover becomes a routine in itself, not really threatening the social order. A historical perspective can help us to see how this belief in the magic power of radical personal transformation repeatedly surfaces in modern Western history, in the 1920s or the 1960s, for example.

My critique may be unfair, but it is based on disappointment. The theme of the book is so promising, yet you continually wish for the author to slow down and dig deeper in the many themes that rapidly pass by. I would have loved a more thorough comparative analysis of, for example, the staging and crafting of ritual transformations in different eras. Here, the author offers us both some interesting comparative material and helpful attempts at contrasting different cultural skills, ritual techniques, and traditions.

Maybe the merit of the book lies in its provocative nature. McCracken knows he is sticking his neck out, categorizing and simplifying trends. It made me long for a different take. What if beyond the glossy façade of postmodern makeovers and playful experiments with life-styles there is an everyday life with strong continuity and stability? A world reproducing patterns of class and gender. In a few decades this may be what we will see in retrospect, not the dramatized and playful performances of personhood. By then we might realize that it was precisely these colorful transformations that helped to maintain rather than to challenge a social order. The problem is of course that in much popular debate as well as in academic writing it is no fun to write about all the energy and steady routines that are needed to maintain status quo, it is much more sexy to dramatize change.

Reference Cited

Kusserow, Adrie

2004 *American Individualisms: Child Rearing and Social Class in Three Neighborhoods*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

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