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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.