

Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel and Sarah Tobias (editors)

Trans Studies: The Challenge to Hetero/Homo Normativities

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Reviewed by Stephanie Kapusta, 2016

Narrated by Zoe Belinsky

The academy has not lagged far behind the increasing social visibility of trans people in North America. The two volumes of *The Transgender Studies Reader* (Stryker and Whittle 2006; Stryker and Aizura 2013), and the launch of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* have helped establish transgender studies as a serious, academic enterprise, with many other works critically taking up the specific perspectives of trans and gender nonconforming people (some examples are Enke 2012; Hines 2013). Trans studies are undertaken in various forms, within various departments, on campuses all over Canada and the US. The University of Arizona plans to launch a master's program in transgender studies. And the University of Victoria has announced an inaugural Chair in Transgender Studies. *Trans Studies: The Challenge to Hetero/Homo Normativities*, is a valuable contribution to the field.

An anthology by scholars and activists, the collection emerged from a 2012-13 program of lectures and seminars organized by the Institute for Research on Women at Rutgers University. The subtitle for the volume is significant. As the editors explain in their concluding chapter, heteronormativity denotes a set of heterosexual norms embodied within institutions, a normalizing "metaculture" that contains many practices that are not sex, and implicates gender identity as well (235). Homonormativity, however, denotes a political quest on the part of LGBTQ people to become mainstream, to participate in the normalizing "benefits" of heteronormative society, such as the market economy, patriotism, the institution of marriage, and service in the military (237), as well as heteronormative understandings of what it is to be a woman or a man. In fact, Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel and Sarah Tobias contend that academic and political *anti*-normativity ends up producing new normativities. Marginality thus "reiterates the same modes of oppression it is supposedly questioning" (234). This is why the editors invite us to move into a space beyond the normative (hence the subtitle). In their view, the task ahead for trans studies is to imagine a post-racial and post-gender world--a world intimated by many of the contributions to this volume--that understands embodiment as other than simply anti-normative.

Trans Studies is divided into five parts: "Gender Boundaries within Pedagogical Spaces," "Trans Imaginaries," "Crossing Borders/Crossing Gender," "Trans Activism and Policy," and "Transforming Disciplines and Pedagogy."

The essays in parts I and V deal with trans issues in schooling and academia. In the opening chapter of the volume, "Creating a Gender-Inclusive Campus," Genny Beemyn and Susan R. Rankin present empirical research on the trans spectrum of college students, and propose policies in two specific areas: the classroom and athletics. In the classroom, not assuming the gender identities of students, diversifying readings and study materials, as well as featuring trans speakers and panels all offer opportunities for engaging in "gender-complex education" (27). In athletics, the authors endorse the fact that some schools and colleges are moving toward teams based on gender identification.

Pauline Park's "Transgender the Academy: Ensuring Transgender Inclusion in Higher Education" takes a broader look at college and university campuses from the point of view of trans inclusion and formulates four proposals: the adoption of policies that explicitly include gender identity and expression, the development of transgender-inclusive curricula across programs and departments, the advancement of openly transgendered faculty into tenure-track positions, and the construction of supportive infrastructure for transgendered faculty, staff, and students.

In "Adventures in Trans Biopolitics: A Comparison between Public Health and Critical Academic Research Praxes," Sel J. Hwang brings to light the theoretical and methodological "gaps" that exist between trans critical studies and trans public health studies. For example, public health studies have masses of quantitative data, whereas critical studies are based on sparse, often qualitative study, making their findings suspect to the more empirically trained eye. But critical studies are theoretically more sophisticated, particularly in the articulation of how power structures can shape lives, an aspect that--because it is not so accessible to exact quantification--is poorly thematized within public health studies, which tend to work "within the system" (203). Somewhat paradoxically, however, because of greater levels of funding, public health studies often have access to very marginalized trans populations, whereas critical trans studies are financially constrained to rely on largely qualitative data from more privileged populations, and the categories they employ are not sufficiently fine-grained. The author ends with a call to close the gaps between the disciplines and points to biopolitics, bioethics, and women of color feminism as disciplines that could help in doing so.

A. Finn Enke's chapter, "Stick Figures and Little Bits: Toward a Nonbinary Pedagogy" deals more specifically with the issue of pronoun use within the classroom. Drawing on her own experience, Enke suggests some innovative solutions that avoid both the linguistic imposition of gender identities as well as the sense of insecurity that some students feel when the issue of pronoun use is engaged directly. For example, using a word such as "friend" to replace pronouns, or asking students during each class to choose a category (colors, flowers, trees . . .) from which their own pronouns can be selected, were particularly effective.

Part III of the book deals with crossing borders and its relation to crossing genders. In "When Things Don't Add Up: Transgender Bodies and the Mobile Borders of Biometrics," Toby Beauchamp shows how normative ideals of gender and race inform practices of border surveillance. Biometric tools of control (fingerprinting, facial recognition) presuppose inherently stable and identifiable bodies, and so will treat changing bodies as "inherently fraudulent or dangerous" (107). Efforts in biometric technology to improve "recognition accuracy" for people who are taking hormones inevitably define "transgender" in particular ways, and remain within a binary logic, creating new forms of "deviant illegibility" (110).

Nora Butler Burke ("Connecting the Dots: National Security, the Crime-Migration Nexus, and Trans Women's Survival") asks what is left unexamined when trans activists adopt an approach that focuses on individual, identity-based rights when tackling migration and travel. There is, for example, silence within trans rights movements about "the violent practices involved in protecting citizenship" (116), particularly with respect to those who are indigenous, immigrants, sex workers, or HIV+ trans women.

However--as forcefully illustrated by Aren Z. Aizura ("Affective Vulnerability and Transgender Exceptionalism")--the US is presented in government and NGO discourses as an "exception," an oasis of freedom for transgender people. Dissecting the documentary film *Transgression*,

Aizura shows how the Mexican trans woman Ureiro is depicted as a passive victim meant to evoke spectatorial sympathy, vulnerable to the "macho" detention-center population. She is also juxtaposed in the film with the white, savior-like officials of Immigration Equality. Aizura sees within *Transgression* a mechanism similar to what Chandra Mohanty criticized within Western feminism, namely, a portrayal of "third-world women" as passive victims of alien socioeconomic systems and barbarism. Aizura urges us to question "the investment of many Trans Studies scholars in a rights-and-respectability model that relies on U.S. exceptionalism" (134).

Of the three essays in part IV ("Trans Activism and Policy"), two chapters present empirical data relating to trans activism and sexual orientation. Mickael Chacha Enriquez ("The T in LGBTQ: How Do Trans Activists Perceive Alliances within LGBT and Queer Movements in Quebec (Canada)") summarizes the results from interviews with seven trans women and five trans men concerning trans activism and its relationship to other social movements. Enriquez's study reveals an ambivalent picture of trans inclusion within LG and LGB movements. Several reasons are given for this. For example, there is still transphobia and cissexism on the part of some LGB activists (although cis lesbians seem to be more open than cis gay men), but there is also resistance to alliances on the part of heterosexual trans people.

Jody L. Herman ("LGB within the T: Sexual Orientation in the National Transgender Discrimination Survey and Implications for Public Policy") looks at the intersectionality of sexuality with trans identity. Herman provides many interesting statistics. For example, only 22% of trans people in the national survey identified as heterosexual or straight. These straight trans people experienced rejection from family at a significantly lower rate than those who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, asexual, or other (181). The heterosexual respondents also had a lower prevalence of suicide attempts (still alarmingly high, of course: 36% vs. 42%). Besides harassment by police, a significantly higher percentage of LGBQAO respondents reported experiencing harassment in all instances (185). Herman concludes that legal protections from discrimination should include sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in order to provide adequate protection for the trans community.

The remaining chapter in part IV records a conversation between Alexandra Rodríguez de Ruíz and Marcia Ochoa, respectively former coordinator and former director of *Ei/La Para Translatinas*, a social justice and HIV prevention program for transgender Latinas in San Francisco. The dialogue between them nicely interrupts the academic tone of the remaining chapters, and provides a vivid, at times moving, portrayal of how trans activism with one of the most marginalized populations in the US works "on the ground."

The more philosophical--and challenging--essays appear in part II. This is particularly true for Lucas Crawford's chapter "'I'll Call Him Mahood Instead, I Prefer That, I'm Queer': Samuel Beckett's Spatial Aesthetic of Name Change." Weaving together elements from Derrida, Butler, Foucault, and various interpreters of Beckett, Crawford offers a suggestive, if, at times, obscure reading of Beckett's text *The Unnamable*. What happens when a trans person changes their name? Well-intentioned allies and fellow trans people infuse the new name with a reassuring, disambiguating theory of gender that the renamer may not feel comfortable with. Such was Crawford's own experience (50). The name--taken as a vehicle of (self-)appropriation--turns out to defer the full appropriation of one's self: one is now, in fact, "owned" by others within a matrix of social expectations and pre-understandings. Through becoming "proper" in a linguistic and social sense, the name fails to capture the "squirmy" shiftiness of embodiment. In Beckett's incessant renaming, Crawford discerns an impulse for

thinking a political praxis of refusal as opposed to a politics of recognition. Taking up Derridean negative ontology, Crawford points out that "the unnamable is defined through negation, or more precisely through 'owning' nothing of his own save for his displaced names--emptied husks that name only the absence of ground" (59). Like gender, a name is grounded in a performative act, in a voice whose only constitutive feature is absence. Yet to be voice, voice must go on voicing, naming and renaming itself, without, however, exhausting itself in the name. Renaming generates change inasmuch as renouncing the stable ground of one's name is also to denounce the settled programs and social parameters that confine us. Beckett's words ask us to "continually, and with necessary failure and tenuousness, keep going and keep renaming and reforming what threatens to settle" (60).

In the chapter "Excruciating Improbability and the Transgender Jamaican," Keja Valens offers a fascinating interpretive portrayal of Lowe, the main protagonist of Jamaican author Patricia Powell's novel *The Pagoda*. Lowe is Chinese, female-embodied, yet dresses and functions as a man within the heterocolonial structures in Jamaica to which he has been transported. By examining Lowe's relationships with the other characters of the novel, Valens reveals the way that Lowe's transgressive identity is, in fact, coerced by the heterocolonial order. Projecting manhood, marriage to a white woman (who herself is "passing" as white), and a heterosexual family outwards into the heterocolonial world, Lowe places himself and his relationships within the coercive structures, yet transgresses them at the same time. Powell's use of male pronouns and references to Lowe as a woman indicate that there is no "true" gender or sexuality for Lowe to inhabit. I was struck here by affinities with Crawford's chapter. Just as Crawford stresses the incessant, performative dynamic of gender and name change, Valens interprets Powell's construction of Lowe's flashbacks in the novel as "endless regress" in which "each step back requires another, and each time we land on something . . . we find only someone else's coercive construction" (71). Lowe emerges--so says Valens--"in and out of the heterocolonial order's denial and creation of him" (79).

The idea of social, economic, and political constraints on sex, sexuality, and gender also comes across forcefully in Jian Chen's interpretation of the media art of Taiwan-born Cheang Shu Lea, particularly of two media projects entitled *I.K.U.* and *UKI*. A digital film and a type of fantasy game, these works portray a futuristic world run by the Genom Corporation whose main activity is the gathering (encoding) for profit of "ecstasy data" from humans of all genders and sexual desires. A key idea in Chen's account of Cheang's media art is that resistance, and "pockets of autonomy" (91) are possible only due to the corporation's reliance on technological control and management. Outlaws function only internally within the system, as mutations and viruses, and the trans gender/sex/race/species realities that arise at the margins of the bio-tech network in *UKI* are discarded by-products. Rejected bodies "reuse, revalue, reassemble, and transform refuse parts into trans genetic, species, and media forms" (95).

Trans Studies is an informative and stimulating read. It brings out the difficulty involved in taking up the aforementioned invitation of the editors to move beyond normativities. On the one hand, the chapters in this volume clearly depict the constraining, normative structures that threaten to make "mainstream" victories for trans recognition into newer editions of oppressive normativity: rights to change one's name that impose notions of stable genders, rights to cross borders that produce new biometric standards of deviant embodiment, transgender rights that buy into military, prison, consumerist--and even LGBTQ nonprofit--industrial complexes. Oppressive systems set the parameters for any recognition or "emancipation." On the other hand, several of the contributors to *Trans Studies* make positive policy proposals. These latter

proposals work within the system. The book thus conveys the palpable dilemma between "working within" and "radically subverting" social normativities. Should incremental politics of recognition and rights be eschewed? Is Crawford's radical "refusal" or what Dean Spade calls "critical trans resistance" (Spade 2013, 193) what we need, even as we see trans rights and trans-positive policies making at least some trans lives easier? *Trans Studies* provides no definitive answers to these questions, but it certainly helps us get the issues more clearly in focus.

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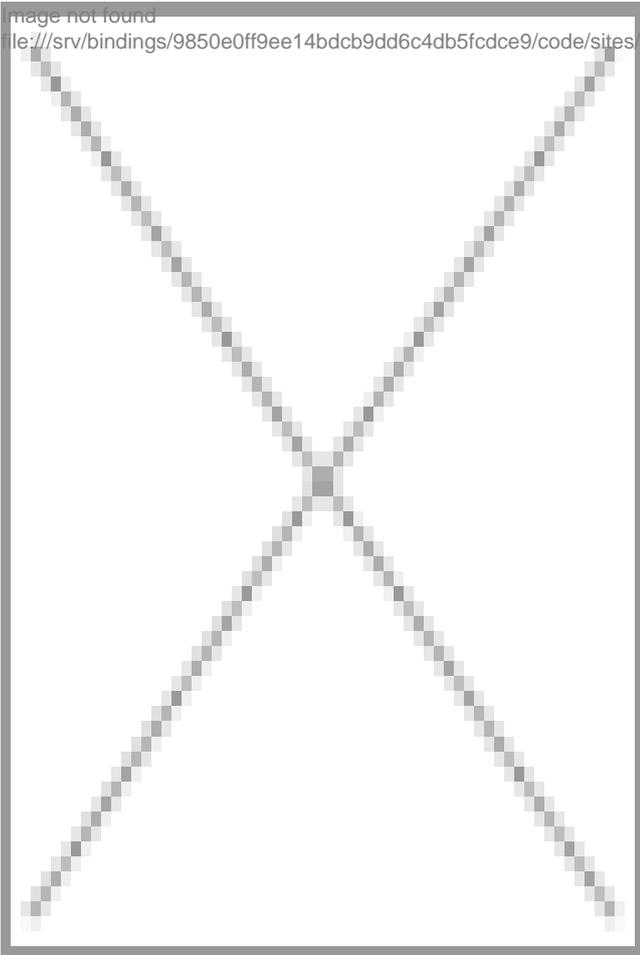


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