

An Overall Success with Some Geopolitical Limitations

Stryker, Susan and Aren Z. Aizura (eds.) *The Transgender Studies Reader* 2. New York and London: Routledge 2013 (693 pages)

IN CLOSE CONNECTION with transgender communities and practices, transgender studies started to develop in critical dialogue with feminist and queer studies in the 1990s. *The Transgender Studies Reader*, which was published in 2006, is the first massive (752 pages) collection of key texts from the field. This volume gave insight into the early topics of transgender studies at the same time as it marked out a more manifest space for transgender scholars, together with scholars who write from a trans-oriented and subject-centered position, especially in the English-speaking world, to transgress hegemonic institutions and write their own voices into the academy. *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* is equally substantial and powerful, showing the theoretical complexity of transgender studies in recent years. Covering a collection of 50 articles from different strands of scholarship, it displays how the field has trans-disciplinarily expanded in multiple directions.

The anthology is divided into ten thematic sections, with five articles in each. Although many of the essays, as the editors point out in the introduction, could have been placed into more than one subdivision, the overall structure makes the book as a whole more comprehensive as the headings of the sections guide the reader along important thematic trajectories. A number of the articles are also in direct dialogue with each other through references, and together with common problems these dialogues draw alternative lines across the subdivisions. Some strong

threads that run throughout the book are the authors' engagements in radical political and economic critique, as well as interdisciplinary and intersectional scholarship, with focus on, amongst other things, biopolitics and the administration of trans-embodiment(s), social justice, citizenship, race, migration, diaspora, cultural production of trans subjects in media and performances, posthumanist perspectives and boundary questions, trans-feminisms, pedagogy, trans-normativity, neoliberalism, resistance and social change, history and temporality, spatiality, and geopolitics of location.

Compared to the first *The Transgender Studies Reader*, the most significant improvement is that a number of articles in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* place issues related to race and class at the focal point of the analysis. The transgender theorizing of the 1990s was taken to task for its ignorance of racial difference in some of the articles in the last section of the first Reader, but this problem is given much more space in the second Reader, where problematization of the implicit whiteness in transgender activism, communities and previous transgender theory is one of the most important topics. To some extent the US-centricity in previous work is also challenged, through focus on history and ethnography in other locations and nations.

As well as giving complex accounts of embodied subjectivity through emphasis on intersectional analysis, the second Reader makes evident how transgender studies has moved beyond poststructuralist perspectives on gendered embodiment, which is a shift that is in line with emerging themes and conceptual developments in feminist, queer and gender studies more generally. However, as the articles do not follow a specific theoretical shift, this move is not made normative. Instead the anthology as a whole oscillates between different perspectives and concepts. It should, moreover, be mentioned that the articles overall are written by authors who do remarkable, thorough and sound theoretical and empirical work. While most of the texts are new, there are also some classical texts that have been published previously. On the whole, *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* demonstrates the maturation and expansion of the field, at the same time as it shows the importance

of previous work. Because of the limited scope of this review, I will not go through all of the articles or address the whole range of diverse issues and the depth of the arguments. I will give a general account of the content of each section and provide insight into the diversity of the topics and concerns by taking a closer look at some of the texts.

The first section demonstrates in different ways how gender normativity and structures of oppression and exploitation are infused with norms and economy related to race, class and nationality. In the first article, "Transgender Perspectives in (and on) Radical Political Economy", Dan Irving uses Marxian critiques of political economy as the departure point for studying how class and mobility inflect ways of understanding transgender in the context of both historical and contemporary capitalist relations. Sarah Lamble continues with analyzing racial hierarchies within transgender politics by looking at the remembering of trans people killed due to anti-transgender violence or prejudice. Mostly with reference to Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDoR), she points out the difference between the people who are remembered; largely poor people of color, and those who organize TDoR events; often white middle-class activists. C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn close the first section with the chapter "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife", where they illustrate the need to think transgender both intersectionally and transnationally by looking at the globalization of hate crime activism and asking how the biopolitics and necropolitics of trans death and trans vitality play out on the privileged stages of North America and Europe.

The second section looks at the making of trans culture through texts, performances and artifacts. Examples are José Esteban Muñoz's classical text about drag superstar Vaginal Davis, where the lens of disidentification is used to argue for the need for a war of positions, and Eliza Steinbock's reading of Hans Scheirl's film *Dandy Dust*, where the analysis ends with suggesting that the refusal of closure in the film can be an invitation for transgender studies to stay committed to curiosity.

Section three expressively moves beyond culture-based scholarship and looks at interdependencies of the human and the non-human in

relation to transgender embodiment, while section four is concentrated on trans-feminist perspectives, offering arguments and models to integrate feminist and transgender theory, practice and pedagogy. Section five covers contention and complexity in trans discourses. It starts with Eli Clare's remarks on what the trans movement can learn from crip and disability activism, and continues with Beatriz Preciado's thought-provoking (as well as seductive) views on the pharmaceutical production of subjectivity in the 21st century; a time when we are facing a new global regime which s/he labels pharmaco-pornographic; a time when subjectivity must be seen both as the effect of biopolitical technologies of control, and as the ultimate site of resistance to them.

Trans-historicity is thoroughly treated in section six, where, for example, Mary Weismantel turns "transgender rage" against the political and intellectual landscape of archaeology, and Deborah A. Miranda reconstructs a history of Two-Spirit existence in Native societies in what became California as a resistance to the loss of Native tradition and knowledge. The last text in this section, Afsaneh Najmabadi's "Reading Transsexuality in 'Gay' Tehran (around 1979)", offers a study of gender reassignment surgery in Iran from the time of the Pahlavi regime until right after the revolution of 1979. The article shows how being transsexual emerged as a more socially acceptable way of being a non-heteronormative male. However, Najmabadi also points out that Western narratives about how Tehran went from being a "gay paradise" to the current condition where sodomy is punishable by death in Iran, while transsexuality is regulated by the state as an opportunity, obscure the complex history of transsexuality in the country. This article is important in the context of the Reader, as it is one of the texts that show the significance of taking on the world from localities outside the framings of the North American and Western context, grounding studies in local specificities, in order to understand the complexity of transgender and non-heteronormative histories and lives in other(ed) locations. The same counts for the first article in section seven, where Todd A. Henry looks at the underground culture of cross-dressed male sex workers in the late 1940s and early 1950s Tokyo. Further focusing on locations this

section also covers two studies situated in Latin America.

Transgender mobility is the focal point of section eight, which contains articles focusing on narratives of gender transition, movements across different subject positions as well as national borders, the rural and the urban, diaspora, citizenship, belonging, and transnational structural inequalities of health care connected to "medical tourism". The section ends with Kale Bantigue Fajardo's (auto)ethnographic travelogue, where he (as a self-defined queer, immigrant, transgender Filipino American tomboy) draws on his own ethnographic encounters with Filipino seamen and their stories about tomboys they have met on shore and at sea. Through a focus on contact zones where heterogeneous masculinities meet, Fajardo reveals queer and complex dynamics, which, amongst other things, facilitate the author's questioning of widely-held assumptions about working class "macho" masculinity. He also discusses and connects US-based queer studies scholars' understanding of tomboys as transgender subjects and Filipina feminists' (in the Philippines and diaspora) understanding of Filipino tomboys as always being lesbians or women. By not privileging the homeland/nation *or* the diaspora as the original site of cultural purity, this article thus seeks to foster important academic dialogues.

Examples from section nine are Susan Stryker's close reading of the 1962 Filipino feature film *Kaming Mga Talyada (We Who Are Sexy)*, which focuses on the transsexual whiteness of Christine Jorgensen, and Sima Shakhsari's article, which starts with the story of Naz, a transgender Iranian refugee, who was featured in two documentaries that sensationalized Iran as a country where transsexual people are shunned. Shakhsari points out that what is not part of the documentaries' narration is that Naz later committed suicide after being granted asylum in Canada. The article ends with a call for further research on the way in which transgender refugees stand at a threshold of life and death as they transition across bodies and borders.

The last section in the Reader covers practices, policies, and social change. While R. Nick Gorton's arguments in the penultimate article, for why he thinks the actions of advocates of depathologization have

their basis in poor logical argumentation, stand out as dissonant with many other articles in the book, the very last article, or rather manifesto, "Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement with Everything We've Got", ties many threads that have run throughout the anthology together. In this text, Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee and Dean Spade call for a radical trans social justice movement, with an activist consciousness, that can link the oppressions that transgender people face to larger structural inequalities that affect many more groups of people – poor people, people of color, women, and queer people, both in the US and around the world.

The Transgender Studies Reader 2 covers a vast sea of topics. I have referred to less than half of all the essays, in order to give examples that can illustrate the amount and complexity of the work represented in the book. Since the Reader aims at diversity, I could have considered much of it more critically, but due to the scope of the review I can only briefly mention that the very success of this feature opens the anthology up to further analytical and critical engagement. I found that the articles can be read both with and against each other.

The Reader is undoubtedly a huge achievement for the editors, but also for everyone laboring to establish the field. Despite this overall success, I want to note one problem. The editors write in the introduction that:

[T]he second iteration of the transgender studies field often directs its critical gaze at the inadequacies of the field's first iteration, in order to correct them, taking aim at its implicit whiteness, U.S.-centricity, Anglophone bias, and the sometimes suspect ways in which the category *transgender* has been circulated transnationally. (Stryker and Aizura 2013, 4)

And, later in the introduction we can read that: "As the range of geographical locations and cultural experience covered by this collection illustrates, transgender studies is clearly no longer, if it ever really was, merely a concern of the North American Anglophone academy." (7) I agree. The Reader directs a critical gaze at the shortages mentioned in

the first quote, and several articles are grounded outside North America (I have highlighted many of them). Nevertheless, the North American historical and contemporary context is clearly given much more space than any other region. Some regions are included by research done in a couple of countries within them, while many regions are not covered at all. Transgender studies still does not sufficiently deal with the range of experiences of "gender liminal" individuals in "other" geographies. It can also be noted that, only with very few exceptions, most of the authors are situated in US and Canadian academia.

The location of the writers is, of course, linked to inequalities with regard to the geopolitics of knowledge production in academia as a whole, and one can obviously not expect full geographical coverage. Nevertheless, I think that it should be highlighted as a hope for trans futurity that more scholars situated at universities outside the US and Canada will write their own voices and work into the discourses of transnational transgender studies. The editors state "the field of transgender studies is moving strongly in transnational directions" (8). It is true. But it is still a task for those of us who are situated "elsewhere", wherever that might be, to strengthen this move. We should also call for more attention towards what is already being produced in "other" regions, countries, and languages. As an example, it can be noted that the same year as *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* was published, *Geografias Malditas: Corpos, Sexualidades e Espaços* (Silva et al. 2013), also a transgender studies reader, was published in Portuguese, with a focus on the lives of trans people, mainly in Brazil but also in Spain, Chile, New Zealand and transnational space.¹ Sadly, there seems to be a lack of dialogue between these Readers.

Despite these last remarks, all in all the collection of the 50 articles covered by *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* is an amazing, strong and wondrous testimony to the efficacious infiltration of the academy by transgender studies, not only as studies about, but also of trans individuals, who, like in the first Reader, figure prominently among the authors. In the Nordic countries, where *lambda nordica* is geopolitically located, trans people are insufficiently involved in transgender studies.

Transgender studies is an emerging field, but we still face a scarcity in the representations of trans lives that put the interests of the subjects first. Here (as elsewhere), the important question still remains as to when we will see trans people hired in the academy and featuring prominently amongst the authors within transgender studies. In our geographical context, *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* should function as a beacon for trans voices to become part of trans academic conversations. It is mainly up to us and our academic environments to make that happen.

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NOTE

1. Here I refer to Jan Simon Hutta's English presentation of the book, September 5, 2013, at the II *European Geographies of Sexualities Conference*, Lisbon, Portugal.

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