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Book Review: Sons of the Movement: FtMs Risking Incoherence on a Post-Queer Cultural Landscape

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Sons of the Movement: FtMs Risking Incoherence on a Post-Queer Cultural Landscape. Jean Bobby Noble. 2006. Toronto: Women's Press. 150 pp. \$24.95 (paperback)

Reviewed by Hae Yeon Choo¹

How can we imagine new gender politics after the rise of identity politics, queer politics and more recently multiple trans-movements? In dialogue with feminism and identity politics more broadly, Jean Bobby Noble in *Sons of the Movement* proposes “an intersectional, post-queer politics of incoherence as a strategy of resistance” (12). *Sons of the Movement* argues that FtM subjects (female to male) have the potential to offer a unique standpoint in feminism to rethink its essentialist notion of gender and rearticulate masculinity by embracing the intersecting embodiment of race, gender, and sexuality. Noble demonstrates this through his autobiographical narrative and examination of various forms of cultural artifacts such as texts, performances, and images of trans-subjects.

Noble speaks of his experience of working inside the lesbian feminist movements for more than a decade, firmly situating himself as an insider of the feminist movement, not an outsider who attempts to get in. The past as a lesbian and a lesbian feminist is not something he wants to renounce now that he identifies as a trans-man even if that means risking incoherence. Noble offers a cogent critique against some feminist accusations that FtMs are betraying the sisterhood by crossing the gender line into male privilege. Noble argues that such an accusation not only assumes the coherence of an essentialized gendered body, but also fails to take intersectionality seriously by reconizing gender as the only meaningful power structure and not thinking critically about the ways in which white privilege works through masculinity (26-7). Furthermore, FtM do not simply become men; rather, their bodies, as Noble visually shows in the concluding chapter through the archive of FtM bodies, remain incoherent in transition in their physical embodiment as well as their history and narratives. The complexity of FtM lives, Noble notes, should not be reduced to the mere experience of simply crossing over to male, but rather, should be understood as “a radical modulation and categorical indeterminacy” (29). Thus, Noble argues on behalf of FtM subjects that “we are sons of the movement and feminism has much to gain by claiming its masculine progeny” (21).

The book makes an important contribution to gender and sexuality literature by proposing the idea of “post-queer” based on “the politics of incoherence.” In suggesting the term “post-queer,” Noble points to the fact that the current vocabularies of gender and sexual categories within queer theory and feminist politics do not fully capture the complexities and incoherence that newly emerging sexual subjectivities demand. Noble shows that FtM bodies, permanently in a state of “incoherent becoming,” have the potential to reveal the labor put into to the ideological sex/gender system to keep it intact - labor that is often rendered invisible through our cooperation in exchange for the fantasy of the coherence and naturalness of our sex/gender. According to Noble, FtM

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subjects “are not bodies as foundation but trans-bodies as archive, witness, risking political incoherence,” and thus are a basis of new post-queer gender politics (98). In the following chapters, Noble extends his conceptualization of the politics of incoherence that challenges the hegemonic sex/gender system, to include discussions of the boy as a gender identity offering a vantage point for resisting adult manhood, the drag king performances resignifying masculinity through parody and irony, and queer femmes disrupting the normal abnormally. With this investigation of female and trans masculinities, Noble complicates and deconstructs the essentialized notion that masculinity is attached to the male body. His work differs from Judith Halberstam’s in that Noble pays more attention to how trans men relate to other subjects of masculinity including men, whereas Halberstam treated female masculinity more or less separate from male masculinity. By doing so, Noble delves more deeply into the ways in which “each instance of masculinity is unquestioningly informed, influenced, mentored, and otherwise learns to become itself from other men in their class or race,” which opens the door to bringing intersectional analysis into the examination of masculinity (26).

Another strength of *Sons of the Movement* lies in Noble’s attempt to keep in focus discourses of race (and to some extent, class) when discussing gender and sexuality. This approach moves his analysis away from a limited focus on gender and sexuality to encompass the embodied experiences of race and white privilege. Using his own body as “a White trans man,” he claims that “for White trans men in particular, an active anti-racist practice is imperative” (15). Although Noble’s critique of often unquestioned white-centerness of feminist discourse is to the point, Noble’s treatment of race does not go very much beyond a call for inclusivity and self-reflexivity for whites. When intersectionality is a central theme in his book, Noble relies on Richard Dyer and Stuart Hall in discussing whiteness, but does not engage with the women of color scholarship from which intersectionality emerged. The complexity that Noble demonstrates in his discussion of gender and sexuality by grounding it in the “politics of incoherence” has yet to be extended to his discussion of race in relation to sexuality. Noble’s analysis would be enhanced with a more nuanced examination of structural power relations in constructing race and the critique of coherence it requires from its subjects, an issue that Noble does not problematize in the book.

Sons of the Movement is a useful introduction to issues of gender, trans-, and masculinity. Noble’s examination of various cultural media such as popular films, performances, and photo archives would especially serve as a helpful model for those working on issues of gender and sexuality through visual representations. Moreover, Noble’s critique of essentialized identity politics and his concepts of the “politics of incoherence” offer productive insights for those in queer and trans- studies, and guides us toward new ways of thinking about new gender politics.
