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Book Review: Trans/Forming Feminisms: Trans-Feminist Voices Speak Out

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Trans/Forming Feminisms: Trans-Feminist Voices Speak Out.

Krista Scott-Dixon, ed. 2006. Toronto: Sumach Press. 280 pp. \$26.50 (paperback).

Reviewed by Dan Irving¹

The relationship between feminist praxis and trans subjectivities within and beyond academe is fraught with tensions. Since the early 1990s, “trans studies” has emerged as an independent interdisciplinary field through critical engagements with theories of sex, gender and sexuality developed by women’s studies and queer theory. Initially, trans intellectuals sought to counter radical feminist assertions, such as those of Janice Raymond (1994) that trans individuals were dupes of the system whose expressions of hyper-normative femininity and masculinity buttressed patriarchy (Stone 2006; Stryker 2006). To do so, much emphasis was placed on celebratory descriptions of trans identities existing in spite of the rigid sex/gender binary.

Recently, the focus of trans commentary has shifted towards problematizing trans identities in terms of their emergence out of systemic power relations that privilege heteronormative masculinities, femininities, whiteness, nationalism and citizenship status, as well as middle class professionals (Spade 2006; Feinberg 2006). It is here that we witness the influence of feminism and the possibilities of rekindling alliances between feminist and trans scholars that will enrich all aspects of critical analysis of sex and gender, as well as bolster organized resistance.

The shared commitment to praxis held by many researchers within Women’s and Trans Studies is noteworthy. In addition to many feminist and trans scholars being community organizers, there exists vibrant grassroots ‘women’s’ and trans communities struggling for justice against the violence of sex/gender oppression within neo-liberal society. While feminist and trans activists share these commitments, significant clashes between them have demonstrated the quagmire of declaring them natural allies. Both sides have collided over issues of defining the perimeters of the category “woman”, the regulation of “women-only spaces” and the possibilities of trans inclusion into social service provisions and structures such as women’s shelters and rape crisis centers. Clearly, much work remains to be done to foster solidarity.

Trans/Forming Feminisms: Trans-Feminist Voices Speak Out, edited by Krista Scott-Dixon, is a timely anthology that speaks directly to the needs of sex/gender theorists, feminist activists, as well as trans individuals and organizers grappling with the relationship of their sex/gender variance to feminism. A compilation of short essays written by feminist trans people, non-trans feminist scholars, lawyers, and front line shelter and rape crisis workers, this book raises key issues related to the systemic constructions of sex/gender, the functioning of multiple relations of dominance within contemporary society, the ways social locations impact the shaping of political consciousness, and the policing of organizational membership and ‘public’ space in order to “begin discussions across boundaries and differences”(12).

This book is a courageous attempt to simultaneously acknowledge the differences between non-trans feminists and trans people while at the same time shifting the focus of analysis towards points of commonality stemming from the functioning of gender as a

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systemic power relation “oppressing bodies, experiences and identities”. (16) While Scott-Dixon stresses that trans individuals and non-trans women experience sex/gender oppression differently, she introduces optimism for readers. Through highlighting the points at which the experiences, identities and oppressions of non-trans women and trans people intersect we are reminded that there can be reconciliation. Mutual resistance efforts, such as those seeking equity through the eradication of the dualistic system of sex/gender, can come closer to realization by “blasting open gender categories” (23).

Borrowing from feminist methodology and written according to one of the key principles of ‘trans studies’, *Trans/forming feminisms* renders trans people the subjects of scholastic investigation rather than its objects. Employing the feminist method of storytelling as a source of knowledge production (36), this book privileges the personal perspectives of many trans contributors concerning their identities and “lived realities”. This anthology is divided into four sections. Section One, titled “Narratives and Voices,” blends academic research with trans people’s personal reflections. This section addresses various themes. First it explores the necessity of self-determination of one’s sex/gender identity and the freedom to outwardly express and embody this identity. The importance of self-identification and embodiment is demonstrated by the essay of a (transsexual) woman who speaks of her new found comfort living post-surgically as the woman she always was despite her ‘male’ physicality and social role, as well as the contribution of an intersexed individual who writes of the struggle of the intersexed to reclaim autonomy regarding their sex/gender identity in a dualistic society where those born with genitalia unrecognizable as normatively ‘male’ or ‘female’ are erased.

A second theme relates to the influence of social context on the development of (trans)sex/gender identities. Many trans people are influenced greatly by their roots within feminist communities. For instance, much of the validation of one transsexual author’s womanhood is derived from the approval of “natal women” who view her as existing “well within the norms of natal females” (57). Another essayist credits the current flexibility of her feminist community, demonstrated in their willingness to engage in debates to reconceptualize gender, for opening space to support the emergence of her genderqueer identity.

The third theme addresses systemic fetters to achieving equity for trans identities in an essay that problematizes the adoption of alternative trans pronouns such as ‘hir’ and ‘s/he’. Without interrogating dominant gender relations privileging white heterosexual masculinity as the symbolic ideal, inclusive language strategies such as alternative pronouns can result in ‘othering’ those with marginalized identities. ‘Hir’ and ‘s/he’ remain unintelligible within a patriarchal context.

The essays comprising Section Two titled “Identities and Alliances” explore two main themes, including the formation of (trans)gendered subjectivities as mediated by heteronormative binary sex/gender power relations and one’s multiple social locations. This section wrestles with the ways in which trans masculinities, cross-dresser’s femininities and queer women’s “fe(me)inities” can be incorporated into a politics that acknowledges the impact of existing heteronormative, capitalist, and ‘racist’ power structures. The second theme addresses the politicization of trans identities to foster the continued growth of feminist consciousness and facilitate spaces for alliance building. Particular attention is paid to strategizing to cultivate lived expressions of counter-hegemonic masculinities, femininities and queer identities. Deconstructionist strategies

include self-awareness (in the case of cross-dressers) of one's experiences when expressing one's femininity and measuring that against the male privilege many heterosexual, middle class cross-dressers enjoy in their everyday lives; embracing bodily incoherence; comprehending one's transition as the "unmaking" of identities; and recognition of how systemic power relations are replicated through community hierarchies. Additionally, it is suggested that non-trans feminists rethink their biases towards trans men and women –in particular their assertion that both have access to male privilege. To achieve the feminist goal of social justice for all, feminist activists ought to think through their own "biocentric" biases regarding gender.

Section Three, titled "Inclusion and Exclusion" and introduced by feminist scholar Margaret Denike, highlights issues pertaining to trans women's inclusion within 'women-only' spaces. Discussions focus around two concrete sites of contestation between transsexual women and non-trans feminists – the Michigan Women's Festival (MWMF) and *Nixon v. VRR* (Vancouver Rape Relief).² Major themes such as human rights protections and (trans) gender discrimination, the framing and regulation of women's spaces, self-identification, and strategies for feminist and trans activism structure this section. Most of the contributors explore the systemic reproduction of the essentialist category 'woman' by the judiciary system, feminist organizations, and even trans activists and allies who employ "strategic essentialism" as a legal tactic to secure inclusion for trans women. They urge feminists (particularly those who are white, heterosexual and middle/working class) to think critically about their locations within dominant racial, class, and gender groups when asserting meanings of 'woman' and arguing for the right to determine membership within organizations.

Readers must be aware that this section includes two essays by feminist organizers sympathetic to VRR and the right of women's organizations to determine their membership. These essays operate at cross-purposes with the book's aim to cultivate trans/feminist alliances. Both pieces differentiate trans women from non-trans women and subsequently feminism from trans activism stressing that women's communities are placed in direct competition with trans women. According to these essays, to legally empower trans women with the right to self-identify as 'women' and join feminist organizations disempowers women's organization by eradicating gains won through past struggles.

The final section entitled "Shelter and Violence" addresses specific debates regarding trans women's struggles to access women's shelters, particularly those with violence against women mandates (VAWs). Contributors reflect upon the gender based violence that endangers the lives of both trans and non-trans women. Clearly, an anti-racist-colonial-homophobic-classist approach to sex/gender based violence is necessary. Challenges to trans women's exclusion from conceptualizations of violence against women and the dominant politics of the shelter movement expose the hegemony of bio-determinist notions of sex, whiteness and middle class privilege that are reproduced by feminist organizers within these spaces. This section calls for unity based on recognizing

² In the "Nixon case," Nixon, a post-operative transsexual woman, was denied the right to be a phone counsellor upon "discovery" of her transsexuality. VRR claimed her lack of "experience" as a woman rendered her unacceptable as a counsellor. Nixon filed a complaint against VRR with the human right tribunal in British Columbia that began a lengthy legal battle.

common oppressions within the larger framework of gender inequality and the necessity of collective actions to achieve equality, dignity and human rights.

Transforming Feminisms has many strengths. It contributes to existing efforts to fill a lacuna regarding forming trans feminist subjectivities and feminist trans awareness. Written accessibly, this book provides pertinent information to a wide audience that could include social service providers, policy makers, community-based feminist and trans activists, as well as a general audience. Furthermore, this book is a valuable resource for trans/feminist scholars teaching about transgender issues particularly to undergraduate students who may be unfamiliar with trans identities and oppression. For students who are trans feminists, or allies, this book renders trans and feminist theorizations of sex/gender more tangible by documenting specific instances of struggle within human rights tribunals, the courts, the shelter movement and social spaces.

In addition, Scott-Dixon's editorial decisions regarding contributors reflects the critical knowledge that trans people were not, and are not on the fringes of the feminist movement requesting admittance. Rather, many trans people are feminists and have a long history of engaging in struggles for sex/gender equity. Likewise, a notable number of non-trans feminists have been trans allies working towards the recognition of trans people and conditions that will improve our lives.

There is a significant tension existing throughout this book that serves as its weakness. Granted, it is challenging to produce a compilation that aims to privilege the narratives of trans people especially relating to self-identification while simultaneously challenging sex/gender as a systemic relation of dominance regulating society. There are essays within this volume (e.g. reese simpkins and Bobby Noble) that emphasize the social construction of trans identities and the need to trouble the oversimplified notion that they are transformative. Rooted within socio-economic and political relations, trans identities are affected by dominant heteronormative, 'race', class, and ablest paradigms. It is the relationship of sex/gender as a "regime of regulation" (Butler 2005) to other ruling relations that captivates the imaginations of progressive feminist theorists and activists such as those involved in anti-racist, anti-capitalist and queer research. It is exactly this kind of critical theorizing and political strategizing that can serve as the basis for strengthening trans/feminist relationships.

Nevertheless, this trajectory of critical analysis is thwarted somewhat within *Transforming Feminisms*. In Scott-Dixon's introduction to the book, to three of the sections and in her conclusion, she does not engage critically with the ideas espoused by contributors. Instead, she maintains a relatively detached position that may be the result of her own coming to grips with her role as a non-trans feminist ally. Uncontested trans narratives stressing "authenticity" serve as most glaring example of this detachment.

The urgency to complicate trans subjectivities has never been so dire. Scott-Dixon's commitment to rendering trans people the subjects of research, a fostering of "self consciousness [that is] healing" (37) and the need for fostering a "critical collective consciousness" (37) based on questioning one's viewpoint and understanding how oneself is rooted within broader social relations are uncomfortably juxtapositioned. What does it mean to foster consciousness of the self? The self is a social entity and cannot exist beyond society. Therefore, fostering a critical collective consciousness capable of galvanizing segments of trans communities means confronting the multiple ways power is infused within our bodies and psyches in ways that appear as if inherent to our beings.

As feminist commentators have demonstrated particularly in their efforts to complicate the category 'woman', narratives of genuineness are theoretically and politically limited (Brown 1995).

The need to critique notions of authenticity is especially relevant to theorizing the sex/gender identities of MTF and FTM trans people. As many contributors in *Trans/Forming Feminisms* demonstrate, determining whether or not trans women are "real women" forms the crux of trans inclusion debates vis-à-vis 'womyn born womyn' policies and 'women's spaces'. To what extent does framing one's theory and praxis around notions of the 'real' reinforce sex/gender as a naturally occurring phenomena rather than a socially constructed exercise of power? How does rooting ones identity in the 'authentic' limit progressive politics? This question is especially relevant currently as trans activists formulate strategies of accessibility for trans women including the "Trans Women are Real Women" campaign launched by Trans Programming at the 519 Community Centre in Toronto (mentioned in the book). The repercussions of the potential success of this campaign (i.e. trans women gaining access to social services and spaces as women) will impact many other segments of trans communities such as non-passing trans women, trans men and genderqueers.

Highlighting this shortcoming opens a space to inquire about the role of non-trans feminist allies and underscores the need to create space to challenge trans narratives without being dismissed outright as 'transphobic' (Ross 2005). While it is true that trans people ought to have the opportunity to tell our stories, the cultivation of solidarity demands that trans/feminists challenge each other rigorously. This relation of "mutual respect" will be based not on a politics of identity but on shared goals of social justice and equity for all.

Trans/forming Feminisms contains many theoretical and personal perspectives from both feminists and trans people that cover much ground and key debates within gender and trans studies. The information compiled here regarding trans identities and contemporary trans-feminist struggles provides instructors, students, service providers and community organizers with a foundation on which we can begin to debate larger philosophical and strategic questions. For this reason, *Trans/forming Feminisms: Trans Feminist Voices Speak Out* is an important book, and a recommended read.

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