

What “Trans Studies” Does

Returning Trans to Methodology

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Sex Is as Sex Does: Governing Transgender Identity

Paisley Currah

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In *TSQ*'s inaugural issue, founding editors Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker (2014: 6) pose that “one critical aspect of transgender studies is to consider the work that the term *transgender* does.” Currah demonstrates the purchase of this hermeneutic in his brilliant monograph *Sex Is as Sex Does*, which focuses on the movement of governmental sex markers to and from *F*, *M*, and *X* in myriad US contexts from the 1950s to 2021. Surveying the contemporary US political scene, Currah turns his attention to what the term *transgender* elides. In so doing, he offers a timely and much-needed intervention into a field he helped define.

Trained as a political scientist, Currah has a particular gift for returning various discourses to the discrete settings that animate their intelligibility. His method, unmoved by ontology, centers how (not why) in this moment “the immense number of state institutions defining sex in the United States has ensnared [transgender people] in a Kafkaesque web of official identity contradiction and chaos” (8). Declining the dominant narrative of trans discourse, which supposes a state technology of transphobia weaponized against those with a transgender identity, Currah prioritizes “local, micro, particular” (89) contexts in which “transgender identity” emerges on the political stage, to adeptly argue that, in general, sex classification is a technology of governance. That sex categorization in its postbirth (re)application affects transgender people, in particular, is for Currah “just the most obvious manifestation” (29) of what this

system does. The case studies in the book's last two chapters offer stunning analyses of these mechanisms of governance, which implicate not just transgender people but *all* those governed by the state—in other words, everyone.

Though disinterested in “theoretical closure” (xiv), Currah is not indifferent to injustice. The book's introduction cites the 1994 case of Jane Jones, a woman arrested and imprisoned for “false impersonation” because of incongruous M/F markers on her driver's license and marriage certificate (6). Rather, Currah finds that the “minoritizing approach” (11) of trans studies and advocacy fails to account for the larger picture of what (state) systems do. In Jones's case, positing the state's misrecognition of immutable “gender identity” as a casual node misses how “technologies of sex classification have long been a necessary mechanism for the state-sponsored oppression of women” (38). The first part of the book, then, aims to denaturalize “sex” as well as “the state” by deftly glossing the historical concepts of sex and gender (chap. 1), popular sovereignty (chap. 2), and social theories of deconstruction (chap. 3). Motivated by the insight that “we don't know what a politics of resistance would look like until we understand what it is we're resisting” (xvi), these chapters distinguish differential state apparatuses of power and authority and stage the affordances and limits of discourses aimed at apprehending them.

By chapter 4, readers are primed to bracket the assumption of a singular entity called “the state” and its “transphobic” misrecognition of “true” gender identity, in order to understand how the asymmetrical logics governing US identity documents and marriage led to “apparently contradictory” (25) regulations of sex (classification) from 1999 to 2004. During this five-year period, though sex was largely changeable on IDs across the United States, several appellate courts ruled that sex was “fixed at birth” and annulled marriages involving people with incongruous sex markers (102–3). Currah's intellectually generous, accessible writing demarcates the divergent institutional investments of surveillance (in the case of identity documents), and nation building via resource distribution (for marriage), foregrounding that “this inconsistency makes sense only if we understand that these very dissimilar constructions of sex furthered different government projects” (103). On incarceration, chapter 5 similarly dazzles. Here Currah elucidates how the oft-employed “trans-vs.-cis analytic paradigm” (14) obscures, in its false equivalence between incarcerated and nonincarcerated transgender people, the more global problem that prison and white supremacy (again, in general) subtend US civil society. This chapter provides a rich topography for further thought—entire books could be written on the philosophical implications of the carceral “freeze-frame” policy, which mandates “maintaining prisoners at precisely the level of gender transition they had attained at the moment of incarceration” (132).

That Currah abstains from heady, abstract wanderings is, in fact, central to his project. Holding and intertwining multiple viewpoints at once, *Sex Is as Sex Does* offers a glimpse of what it might look like to *strategically* deploy discourse in the register it best suits, without collapsing it into other contexts and thereby concealing what its terms make visible. Currah's capacity to graze and mobilize, without committing to, various discourses also makes him an exceptionally agile storyteller. The book's hyper-readable—dare I say fun?—prose artfully navigates an archive of governmentality that Currah quips “even Foucault found too dull to look into” (87)—bureaucratic and judicial guidance, procedures, rules and rulings on sex (re)classification—while incorporating personal anecdotes and clear, distilled readings of high-theory concepts, like sovereignty. Nowhere else have I found a completely intelligible, three-page exegesis of language performativity that, somehow also reinforcing the book's central claims, interweaves the theories of J. L. Austin, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, and Judith Butler (81–83). As implied in the imperative grammatical mood of its title (which also serves as a description of Currah's critical method, 144), *Sex Is as Sex Does* is principally concerned with how language—whether in a department of motor vehicles handbook, legal proceeding, or demand for trans rights—*does* things through its constant slippage between constative and performative modes (I'm telling you: see pp. 81–83!). An essential, course-correcting contribution to the fields of trans and gender studies, as well as feminist, social, and political theory, Currah's book also serves as an entry point for those not particularly versed in these interdisciplines.

In the last twenty years, Currah argues, *transgender* has consolidated various incoherent, messy lived experiences, epistemologies, identities, frameworks, and material positions into a politically efficacious discourse, featuring a “singular motif of the wronged transgender subject” (26). On one hand, the legibility of this figure has enabled successes in the realms of policy and business: North Carolina, for instance, rescinded an anti-trans bathroom bill in 2016 because of mainstream and corporate support for trans issues (146). However, in naturalizing gender/identity, this “authoritative discourse” (46) has rendered larger-scale, feminist critiques of gender systems “quaint, or even unrecognizable to progressive millennial and Gen Zers” (15)—something especially problematic as policies restricting abortion and limiting reproductive health care continue to snowball across the United States. Modeling a nuanced, “heterodox method for transgender studies” (24), *Sex Is as Sex Does* gives a remarkable account of which imbricated gendered and racial histories and systems fade into the background when trans discourse assumes its terms to be objects, rather than political effects.

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Reference

Stryker, Susan, and Paisley Currah. 2014. Introduction to “Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies.” Special issue, *TSQ* 1, nos. 1–2: 1–18.