Rogers BRUBAKER, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016)

Trans is a fascinating and brave book. It is also, in many ways Utopian, as it invites us to think with it about a modern world in which categories once understood as "distinctively stable, rigorously categorical, legally embodied, and reliably decodable" [131] are increasingly open to choice and change. It invites us to do so, in particular, through thinking about the possibilities of transgender and transracial movements. Motivated by the much publicized and accepted transition story of Caitlyn Jenner (the winner of the decathlon at the 1976 Montreal Olympics) and the rejected transition story of Rachel Dolezal (former president of the NAACP in Spokane, Washington), Brubaker asks why it is that, although sex is thought to have a biological basis, the concept of transgender is so much more acceptable than the concept of transracial. The book works through different modalities of trans—"the trans of migration" (moving from one category to another), "the trans of betweenness" (perhaps a third gender or a position in between two possibilities), and the "trans of beyond" (possibilities of existing beyond or post race and gender). In so doing, particularly with the "trans of beyond," it invites us to imagine such worlds.

Under the Utopian vision, however, is a book that is less about explanation and more about classification. Running through *Trans* are multiple classificatory logics—the logic of race versus the logic of gender; the logic of essentialism versus that of voluntarism; and the various logics, ultimately, of transness. Explanations in this book are fitted around the edges while the main task appears to be the laying out of logics and their possibilities. In this review, I will consider the relationship between the choice of classification over explanation with regard to questions of place, modernity, and lived experience.

Trans is not a book, Brubaker writes, about the lived experiences of those who actually move between categories [xi] but about transformations in systems of classification. Perhaps because of this, *Trans* is an ideational account. There appear to be categories in the modern world that multiply and, through their multiplication, create the world. There is no real sense that all classification is political

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(though Brubaker certainly shows this in his other writings), as revealed in work such as Cristina Mora's on the making of the category "Hispanic," which emphasizes the politics and social movements that create, have a stake in, and fight for identities.[1]

In order to make room for the understanding of transracial and transgender politics, which could have lent a more explanatory cast to the book, Brubaker would have had to consider place more seriously. Which place is *Trans* about? Is it about the United States? About the West? Against the backdrop of which place are we to read his arguments? In which place or places do his logics hold? Let us consider the question of crossing gender binaries. Would transgender arise in a country or society that does not think of gender in hard and binary ways? Many people know about the category of Hijra in India. Today, Hijras are swept into the global transgender movement, but their social existence has long been recognized. Indeed in 2005, without fuss or fanfare, the Indian government introduced the option of an "O" or "Other" category in Indian passports. This does not mean that Hijras are not reviled, but just that they counted as a third gender. What would this book look like if we were writing about India, where third genders were recognized years ago, and where trans does not really imply movement but a stable in-betweenness?

There is one explanation of the unease occasioned by the transracial to which Brubaker returns to several times, and that is the importance of ancestry in systems of racial classification. The truth of gender, he writes, is internal, and the truth of race external. Because of this, the transgender appeal to being "born in the wrong body," which lays claim to an inner truth, can be heard. For race, however, a similar argument does not make sense, Brubaker argues, because of the belief that people's racial or ethnic identity is bound by ancestry—something that came before, but is external to, an individual. In other words, it is the tying of ancestry to race that raises the red flag of fraudulence when one claims to be of a racial group in which one does not appear to have ancestors. But again, of which place, beyond the United States, is this true? A parallel to race in India would be caste, a concept deeply attached to bodies as well as to ancestry. Caste hierarchies are firmly rooted, utterly embodied and, often, unspeakably cruel. Yet, in India, after the system of affirmative action by caste was established, both individuals and whole categories of people sought reclassification as "Backward" or "Other Backward" castes in

[1] Cristina Mora, 2014, *Making Hispanics: How Activists, Bureaucrats, and Media Constructed a New American* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press).

order to gain access to government jobs or entrance to educational establishments. Ancestry then, did not block the possibility of trans-caste movements. My point here is that with a clearer understanding of the specificity of place, we would imagine different sorts of movements that were and were not possible, requiring perhaps an altogether different system of classification.

Brubaker's conception of classification is undergirded by a particular theory of modernity. He writes: "In recent decades identity categories of all kinds have come to seem fragile and unsettled." The modern world for Brubaker is a place where things are increasingly open to choice and change [131]. He has a progressivist understanding of modernity ever unfolding into a more liberatory, less identitarian, future. However it is precisely in the modern world that classification assumes increasing importance, where religions get ethnicized and boundaries calcified. In thinking with Foucault, we see that once same sex relations become classifiable as homosexual, forms of sexuality practices at large become constricted, contained, medicalized. Modernity is both liberatory and containing, both hardening and softening. Returning to the United States, we need look no further than the Trump election to show the retrenching and closure of identity. Even if we consider the August 2017 demonstrations in North Carolina as the last gasp of white supremacy, it has been a powerful and socially transformative one. This past year has also made evident the fact that transgender is not quite as acceptable in the United States as *Trans* would make it seem. To imagine that transgender bathrooms throughout the country could be the subject of legislation and we could then move on, was surely, and manifestly, too hopeful. One might write these off as blips on the road to modernity, but one would do that only if wedded to a particular linear or progressivist vision of history.

Modernity and transinclusive politics make for strange bedfellows. Iran is second only to Thailand in the numbers of sex-change surgeries performed. What unsettled identities are in play in Iran? In her fascinating work on trans surgeries in Iran, Afsaneh Najmabadi suggests that "[f]or legal and medical authorities, sex-change surgeries are explicitly framed as the cure for a diseased abnormality, and on occasion they are proposed as a religio-legally sanctioned option for heteronormalizing people with same-sex desires or practices."[2] She argues further that the prohibition against same-sex practices,

[2] Najmabadi Afsaneh, 2008, "Transing and Transpassing Across Sex-Gender Walls in Iran", *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 36 (3-4): 23-42.

simultaneously legal and religious, does in fact influence gays and lesbians in Iran to consider transsexuality as a viable (and religiously sanctioned) alternative, which provides for some, "room for relatively safer semi-public gay and lesbian social space, and for less conflicted self-perceptions among people with same-sex desires and practices." Under these conditions, sex-change surgeries, made available due to modern science, are favored by the state in order to eliminate homosexuality. There is no room for this level of complexity in the logic of transgender in *Trans*.

Finally, I return to the decision to write a book about transformations in categories rather than lived experience. *Trans* takes as its starting point the ways in which the stories of Caitlyn Jenner (transgender) and Rachel Dolezal (transrace) were differently received and debated in both US media and scholarship. Motivating stories often shape the direction of books. In this case, the motivating stories are of transitions made (or attempted to be made) by privileged white women. By allowing Jenner and Dolezal to stand in for transgender and transracial, treating Jenner as if she has only a gender and Dolezal as if she has only a race, Brubaker is able to keep logics of race and gender apart. It is precisely because he does not consider lived experiences that he can remove race from gender, and assume that ancestry plays no role in sex and gender. Yet, the social violence visited upon some transwomen and not others, and the privilege that accrues to some transwomen and not others, have everything to do with ancestry. Perhaps one should not expect too much from one slim yet generative volume, yet centering *Trans* in a specific time and place, and paying attention to lived experience would not have blurred Brubaker's analysis. Rather, it would have forced a simultaneous consideration of the logics of racialization and gender, which in turn would have provided an even deeper insight into the logic of the social constitution of the United States and of its particular classificatory systems.

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