

Susannah Cornwall, *Constructive Theology and Gender Variance: Transformative Creatures*

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Susannah Cornwall, well-respected for her prior work on gender and sexuality, begins her latest book, *Constructive Theology and Gender Variance: Transformative Creatures*, by asking: ‘What possesses a cisgender woman to attempt a constructive theology of gender variance?’ (p. 3). Cornwall is aware that she might face criticism for this endeavour, yet she is convinced that current attacks on trans people are (1) causing harm and (2) indicative of displaced anxieties about the instability of normative understandings of gender. These two concerns are the purview of any theologian and fall well within Cornwall’s larger expertise.

The book is organised in four parts. The first three parts – nine chapters – investigate the various forms of reasoning offered by those who deny the legitimacy and blessing of trans identity. Many of the arguments addressed are offered by ‘gender critical feminists’, or ‘trans-exclusionary feminists’. Part I addresses concerns about detransitioning, as well as existing Christian theological responses that are condemning or so vaguely affirming that they are still harmful. Part II addresses concerns about autonomy, authenticity and artifice. Part III focuses on medical concerns, including trauma and anxiety, neurodiversity and fertility. Cornwall takes seriously the articulated worries of those who point to higher-than-average incidences of mental health issues or neurodiversity among trans people as reasons to be sceptical of their self-descriptions. She also engages those who state loss of future fertility as a reason to prevent others from transitioning. In each of these chapters, Cornwall carefully examines the studies, arguments and explanations that are used against trans people. With painstaking care, she reports the flaws in the studies, the holes in the arguments and the theologically dubious assumptions behind the explanations. The anti-trans rhetoric is debunked.

The process, however, is painful. On the strength of Cornwall’s prior work, I assigned parts of this book for a Queer Theologies seminar before I had read it. I regret my irresponsibility. In order to do the work of dismantling anti-trans arguments, Cornwall first reports them and takes them seriously. This gives a lot of airtime to fear and folly. The cisgender students found it excruciating to have their classmates’ validity debated in the text. The trans students found it rudimentary. They are very familiar with the arguments against them and why those arguments fail. The neurodiverse students found it offensive, citing troubling historical roots of calling autism a ‘superpower’ (p. 231). But while I regret assigning the first portions of this book to my students, I am grateful that Cornwall wrote them.

I am reminded of James Bradley. He was kidnapped in Africa, enslaved in Kentucky, emancipated by his own labour and enrolled in Lane Theological Seminary. In February of 1834, the seminary staged a series of debates on slavery. Bradley participated in that event, speaking for roughly two hours. Another seminary student, Henry B. Stanton,

wrote, ‘This shrewd and intelligent [B]lack, cut up these white objections [to Black freedom and racial integration] by the roots’.¹ Bradley was subsequently instrumental in pushing Oberlin College to have a formal race-blind admissions policy, the first in the country.

A human being participated in a debate about his own humanity. Bradley should not have had to do that work. That work – convincing white people of Black humanity – should never have been necessary, and when it was made necessary by the horror of slavery, white people should have done it. In the first sections of *Constructive Theology and Gender Variance*, Cornwall does the work that should, rightly, be done by a cisgender scholar. I pray these chapters are soon obsolete.

In Part IV, Cornwall develops the constructive theology she has been moving towards throughout the book. She notes that humans prize order as a way to manage expectations and minimise danger, so much so that ‘we often create and cling to arbitrary and over-solidified delimitations in order to exercise power’ (p. 281). In chapter 10, Cornwall focuses specifically on the intersections of theological discourse about sex, race and animality. In much theology, humans are seen as animals only when convenient, with an emphasis on the differences that place humans above animals, so that strict norms for sex and gender – including gender binaries and approving only procreative sex – mark humans as superior. This fictive narrative of human sexuality empowered the denigration of Africans and Black people under slavery as sexually promiscuous ‘animals’ and diverted attention from the sexual abuses perpetrated by colonists and enslavers. Sex and gender were ‘constructed as processes of colonization and projected inequitably across differently raced bodies’ (p. 289). Sojourner Truth exposed this in 1851, demanding, ‘Ain’t I a woman?’, yet the association between race, sex and animality continues to do the work of white supremacy. The unholy confluence of hierarchies is both powerful and fragile, policed by people claiming it is natural and unalterable. Cornwall argues that these interwoven hierarchies will stand or fall together, such that ‘attempts to relearn humility about our relationship with non-human creatures and to dismantle racialized hierarchies will fail if they are not accompanied by a thoroughgoing disruption of sex-based ontologies too’ (p. 301). She continues, ‘[t]he present climate emergency means that the imperative to do so is even more critical than we might otherwise have suspected’ (p. 310).

A tenet of activism is ‘don’t acquiesce in advance’. Cornwall sketches submission to gender binaries as a form of advance acquiescence to multiple hierarchies of domination. The insights shared by trans people reveal that ‘we are more powerful as creatures than we have dared to know and that certain of the limits we have as humans persist, in large part, because we too commonly accede to them’ (p. 342). Cornwall speaks of gender in ways that are provisional and proleptic, as she looks forward eschatologically on christological grounds. Being open to the transforming power of Christ at the end of time does not replace, but necessitates, being open to our own creaturely transformative powers in time, as they are oriented towards God in hope and love. The final chapters of this book are a hope-filled opening of constructive theology that will inspire readers and shape theological discourse for years to come.

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¹Ron Gorman, ‘James Bradley – From Hopeless Bondage to Lane Rebel’, Oberlin Heritage Center Blog, Oberlin Heritage Center. <http://www.oberlinheritagecenter.org/blog/2013/09/james-bradley-from-hopeless-bondage-to-lane-rebel/> (accessed 14 August 2023).