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Book Review: Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law by Dean Spade

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Abstract:

This is a book review for the 2011 book *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* by Dean Spade.

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Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law by Dean Spade. Brooklyn, NY: South End Press, 2001. 248 pp. ISBN 978-0896087965.

Colleges and universities have begun to discuss how inclusive their campuses are for transgender students, faculty, and staff. Common trans-inclusive measures include anti-discrimination policies or “gender-neutral” restrooms and residence hall floors; however, these efforts are not enough to address the lived experiences, potential threats of violence -- physical, emotional, and psychic -- and discrimination that transgender individuals face daily. Despite the proliferation and application of critical and poststructural perspectives such as Critical Race Theory (CRT) and queer theory, a critical exploration of transgender perspectives has been noticeably absent. Dean Spade’s book, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* addresses this absence through a focus on the ways in which transgender bodies and perspectives are made visible through the traditions set by legal scholars and critical theorists. As he articulates in the introduction of the book,

Trans people are told by the law, state agencies, private discriminators, and our families that we are impossible people who cannot exist, cannot be seen, cannot be classified, and cannot fit anywhere. We are told by better-funded lesbian and gay rights groups, as they continually leave us aside, that we are not politically viable; our lives are not a political possibility that can be conceived. Inside this impossibility, I argue, lies our specific political potential...*A critical trans politics is emerging that refuses empty promises of “equal opportunity” and “safety” underwritten by settler colonialism, racist, sexist, classist, ableist, and xenophobic imprisonment, and ever-growing wealth disparity.* (p. 41, emphasis added)

This book challenges educators to (re)conceptualize the true meaning of creating trans-inclusive environments.

Spade, in the introduction, states clearly that “We need a critical trans politics that is about practice and process rather than arrival at a singular point of ‘liberation’” (p. 20). He explains and explores major tenets of CRT, specifically intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1996) and interest-convergence (Bell, 1996), as a way to lay the foundations of his argument, orient the reader for where he will go in the remainder of the book, and show how critical trans politics should be viewed in concert with such work.

In the first chapter, “Trans Law and Politics on a Neoliberal Landscape,” Spade develops the argument that there is a “general trend in neoliberal politics of denying that unequal conditions exist, portraying any unequal conditions that do

exist as natural or neutral, and suggesting that key access/resource issues are a matter of individual ‘freedom’ or ‘choice’” (p. 58). He suggests a legal-only approach to rights effectively colludes in rendering the transgender community invisible. The legal-only approach to rights is steeped in the construction of messages, legislation, and a movement that is palatable to the broader public (one that is able to generate revenue through fundraising and private donors). Seeking this broad-based support creates a normalizing effect whereby the transgender community is placed on the periphery within the lesbian and gay movement as untenable and non-viable. Instead, Spade argues that a critical trans politics should seek community and advocacy with other highly marginalized populations who continue to be left behind in the effort for some groups to gain social access, rights, and privileges. Rather than think solely about the transgender community, critical trans politics must pay attention to how the struggle for transgender equity is inextricably linked to immigration reform, criminal justice reform, and demilitarization. Gone are the days of single-issue advocacy and resistance, as Spade makes a call to practice a politics of emancipation that lays bare how working for the liberation of one group at the cost of further marginalizing another is counterproductive.

The second chapter, “What’s Wrong with Rights?,” considers how the gay and lesbian movement’s overwhelming focus on the passage of anti-discrimination and hate crime legislation does little to improve life chances for those it seeks to support, especially the transgender community. Spade argues that by providing a rationale for increased funding to police and the criminal justice system, which have historically used their power to perpetuate rather than minimize violence against marginalized populations, these laws may indeed do irreparable harm to those they are intended to protect.

Chapter three, “Rethinking Transphobia and Power – Beyond a Rights Framework,” uses a Foucauldian approach to rethink how power operates in society. Rather than considering power in terms of a Marxist bourgeoisie/proletariat dichotomy, Spade discusses what he calls disciplinary power – the structural oppressions generated by social norms through which society comes to learn what constitutes “good behavior and ways of being” (p. 104) – and population-management power – the inequitable distribution of life chances on a population-wide level. His main objective in this chapter is to “[illuminate] the complexity of how race and gender operate as vectors of the distribution of life chances that cannot simply be solved by passing laws declaring that various groups are now ‘equal’” (p. 119). Already, educators should be able to see how Spade’s critique exposes flaws in current practice, as campus discourse rarely goes beyond a rights-based analysis.

In the fourth and fifth chapters, “Administering Gender” and “Law Reform and Movement Building,” Spade discusses how the transgender community is scrutinized, regulated, and violated through administrative policies and practices such as identification documents (e.g., changing one’s name through university systems), sex-segregated facilities (e.g., restrooms, residential facilities), and health care access (e.g., student health centers and counseling services). Rather than identify only the inherent flaws in these systems, he explicates how a critical trans politics can help build resistance movements that work collaboratively with other highly marginalized populations. Spade’s conclusion, titled “This Is a Protest, Not a Parade!” makes the bold statement that “social justice trickles up, not down” (p. 223). As such, Spade advances the radically refreshing position that we must focus steadfastly on how our (in)actions collude, work against, and/or move closer to a politics “where the well-being of the most vulnerable will not be compromised for promises of legal and media recognition” (p. 224).

Spade’s focus on administrative violence through how IDs are (not) issued, facilities are arbitrarily segregated by sex, and how health care access is restricted to transgender individuals is highly transferable to higher education. If we are to agree with Spade’s stance that social justice trickles up, then we must fundamentally change how we operate on our campuses. Rather than focusing on the most visible communities and populations, we must center those who are most vulnerable, invisible, unsafe, and/or at risk. This would change the way we conceptualize: space on campus (e.g., are there visible and easily accessible bathrooms and changing areas for transgender and gender non-conforming individuals throughout campus?), office policies and practices (e.g., do offices have a dress code that creates gendered norms of appearance such as men must wear slacks and ties and woman must not wear skirts of a certain length?), retention efforts (e.g., what are the purposes of increasing retention? Who are we trying to retain and why?), and campus culture (e.g., what evidence do we have that college and university campuses are the safe, welcoming, and inclusive spaces they tout as striving to be through mission and values statements?), among others. *Normal Life* calls on colleges and universities to bridge the gap between our espoused values of inclusion and advocacy with our actual practices. Spade’s counter-narrative is not easily forgotten and leaves an indelible mark on those who read it. It is provocative, challenging, critical, and has the potential to deeply transform our practice regarding the transgender community and, on a broader level, social justice, and equity.

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Reviewer

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