

Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law. By Dean Spade. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2011; pp. 246, \$16.00 paper.

In *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*, Dean Spade offers readers a map for what critical trans politics can do to combat the violence done by the uneven distribution of life chances under social programs and legal practices. The book opens with a reflection on his work with the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, after which Spade recounts the story of two people, Jim and Bianca, whose trans identities intersected with multiple systems of oppression. These multiple systems police, punish, and do violence to those who are already vulnerable. According to Spade, Jim and Bianca's cases are far from unusual. Most of Spade's trans clients have had their lives marred by a legal system that at best could not fathom their existence and at worst actively punished them by depriving them of access to basic social supports like jobs, medical care, education, public spaces, shelter, and state sanctioned identity documents (11). The kind of violence enacted on trans subjects, according to Spade, is a combination of overt transphobia and system-wide double binds. To be sure, those that are the most vulnerable to violence are afforded the least protection from it, meaning poor trans populations of color are the most likely to die because of the way social structures allocate resources and truncate life chances. At its core, *Normal Life* explores the role of law in these deadly dynamics and envisions better solutions to the problems limiting the life chances of trans people.

Step one for Spade involves understanding the social and political landscape we presently occupy that allows for this kind of violence. This requires learning how deeply embedded neoliberalism is in creating the policies, conditions, and attitudes that govern the social realm. Because of neoliberalism's profound impact, the character of mass mobilization efforts for social change that typified organizing efforts in the 1960s and 1970s has shifted to a nonprofit, short-term, goal-oriented business model that echoes both the values of neoliberalism and

the violence it enacts. Spade calls on readers to move away from the rights strategies often deployed by lesbian and gay nonprofit organizations, and instead engage in a more profound challenge to “the criminalization, poverty, and violence that trans people face every day” (35).

Part of the problem, according to Spade, has been that transgender activism has begun to model itself after the legal reform strategies that have dominated lesbian and gay rights activism in the last few decades. Focusing on anti-discrimination and hate crime law should not be what guides trans struggles against social violence. These types of legal reforms focus exclusively on inclusion and representation within the law. As an alternative to the strategy of including gender-identity in the laundry list of legally protected identity categories, Spade focuses on the material affects the law has on people’s lives. This emphasis demands that readers approach political problems from an ethic of abolitionist trans liberation. Such an ethic requires emphasizing trans existence and using that existence and the conditions of possibility that underwrite the violence done to trans subjects as the basis on which we build our tactics for change.

Drawing on critical race theory, intersectional feminism, disability studies, Native studies, abolition studies, and the work of theorists like Foucault, Spade argues a critical trans politics requires an understanding of power that is not invested in an equality model of legal intervention but, instead, is committed to challenging the administrative violence the law creates. Spade presents examples of how the law exacerbates conditions of violence by using categories like race, gender, and ability to regulate social resources and exclude those who do not comport themselves to these normative configurations. In addition to creating these conditions of violence, the law does not protect poor queer populations of color from vulnerability. In other words, Spade suggests seeing the law as the problem rather than the solution. Spade considers government administration and the legal system as the ultimate perpetrators of anti-trans violence. Critical trans politics does not center law reform, but it does take into account the legal mechanisms that do violence to trans populations, like: prisons, poverty, health-care exclusions, deportations, and racial profiling. It works toward mass mobilization efforts by drawing on “The Four Pillars of Social Justice Infrastructure,” which was first articulated by the Miami Workers’ Center. The pillars include working to change policies, political attitudes, approaches to direct service, and the distribution of power (180–181). In addition to changing the way mobilization happens, a trans politics that takes up an abolitionist, anti-racist, anti-settler colonial ethic would reject the kinds of police intervention, criminal punishment, and client/server approaches that presently dominate LGBT politics. Instead of consumerist pride parades, critical trans politics focuses on the needs

and experiences of queer and trans people of color subjected to poverty, immigration policing, and ablest marginalization. It crafts community-based solutions to violence that do not rely on the police. It resists cooptation, engages in direct support, and builds a critical base of trans leaders that can speak to the complexity of the issues facing queer and trans communities.

Spade's book is a "must-read" for those committed to social justice work, whether they are students in ethnic studies courses, community organizers working to combat police brutality, or artists challenging our gendered presumptions of who counts as human. Spade's treatise on what a critical trans politics has to offer is particularly useful for those working within a legal rights framework as well as those who are seeking modes other than legal reform to make trans lives more livable. It is accessible enough for an advanced undergraduate audience but rich enough in content for graduate students and legal advocates to use as a roadmap to question the role of "rights" in state violence.

This book adds to the growing body of literature that pushes readers to work for deep social transformation. It invites us to resist the temptation of recognition and inclusion, proffering instead a vision of collective mobilizing that can make trans people less susceptible to violence. Ultimately, *Normal Life* pushes us to reconsider trans-inclusive gestures, like being added to anti-discrimination policies, that do so little to protect trans subjects from the physical, structural, and epistemic violence that impacts so many of our lives. Spade's work is a profound resource for social justice workers and scholars willing to help build a radical trans resistance based in racial, economic, and gender justice.

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