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Mobile Subjects (Review)

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[Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment](#)

Reviewed item:

Aren Z. Aizura. 2018.

Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment

Durham and London: Duke University Press

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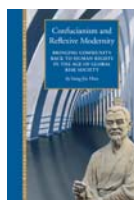
Provocative analysis is paid to how the material and the geopolitical constitute transgender and gender non-conforming experience, subjectivity, and representation in Aren Aizura's debut monograph, *Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment*. The monograph is ambitious as Aizura provides a wide-ranging assessment drawing on multiple geopolitical locations while crossing genres. The book travels across literary criticism, auto/ethnography, and geographic thinking in order to reconsider the persistence of travel narratives constructing *transgender*. Responding to queer and transgender theorizing that has assessed the spatial and binary implications of gender reassignment surgery (GRS) in a host of terms (e.g. gender transformation) the monograph 'follows' its subjects through what the author argues are the necessarily transnational circuits of capital along which transgender and gender nonconforming subjects in the West construct identities and narrate their selves. The transnationality of the sources taken up have us travel the Anglophone world, across continents and hemispheres, to draw out similarities and divergences in transgender narrativizing practices imbricated in their colonial and imperial origins. Focusing on the cosmopolitan sites of GRS technologies outside the West, particularly Casablanca and Bangkok, the author poses counterintuitive juxtapositions of colonial transgender narratives during a waning British Empire, and the recuperative (and potentially transnationalist) tendencies of US medical tourism in Southeast Asia. If the United States is the primal scene of transgender modernity in the world today, the author's own origins from Australia provide an alternative reading of the promises and failures of the Anglophone world's outlying, highly developed, welfarist state. Drawing on personal experiences, and gesturing toward punk subcultures, the author's assessment of Australia's socialized medical system against that in the United States calls into question the often-uncritical presumptions of superiority of one system over the other. While holding fast to a progressive politics of access to medical technologies, the author nevertheless troubles the means by which we evaluate the benefits and shortcomings of any medical system.

Much of the work centers on deconstructing the discourse and practice of gender reassignment and transgender life narratives in order to showcase two interconnected concerns: the geopolitics of the affective and the discursive production of gender reassignment, which necessarily produces raced and classed subjects. This text can be read as a contribution to the studies of whiteness, noted in the introduction, *Provincializing Trans*. The monograph is then divided in two parts, which indicate two different methods for analyzing GRS. Part One lays the groundwork for the entire text by prompting the reader's journey by situating queer and trans theory as they have come to be understood in film and literary analysis. The first chapter, *The Persistence of Trans Travel Narratives*, deconstructs spatio-temporal assumptions embedded in processes of transgender subjectivation. Drawing attention to the assumptions of travel not only in the nomenclature itself but in purported pro-trans and pro-queer policies and practices that seem to persistently assume transgender 'becoming' as a singular event, sequestered for the benefit of all. The second chapter, *On Location: Transsexual Autobiographies, Whiteness, and Travel*, aims to push analysis of the conventions of transgender narrativizing beyond the now widely held assessment that transgender assumes travel but that such travel is inseparable from the circuits of capital that make mobility possible for some, while restricting it for others. Taking a historical and literary glance into the past few decades, Aizura excavates what will only seem obvious after having read this work: that the ways in which GRS was made possible in the 20th Century not only served to produce idealized subjects, but that this idealization was premised on a mobility, in all senses of the term, available primarily to a small subset of privileged whites. The third chapter, *Documentary and the Metronormative Trans Migration Plot*, then, provides a look at the current state of trans narratives in film. Focusing on films that highlight non-elite South-to-North trans migration sets up the book's shift in focus in its second half. Part Two, then, takes us outside the humanities and to Aizura's ethnography of transwomen who travel to Thailand for GRS. The fourth chapter, *Gender Reassignment and Transnational Entrepreneurialisms of the Self*, introduces us to the neoliberal answer sought after by both US transwomen and their Australian counterparts. In the fifth chapter, *The Romance of the Amazing Scalpel: Race, Labor, and Affect in Thai Gender Reassignment Clinics*, the ethnography shifts to the ways in which an ensemble of race, ethnicity, gender and affective labor are consumed along with the surgical aspects in a form of transnational, though deeply colonial, consumer culture. The Epilogue, *Visions of Trans Worlding*, concludes the monograph by reflecting on the current state of inequalities in transgender public cultures and their respective global supply chains.

This is a passionate text and often considers and acknowledges routes not 'followed' throughout, thereby referencing the potential limits and limitations of the work, as any work should rightly do. I contend that this indicates a thoroughly researched project, though find it important to highlight one absence, namely ethnographic material on the non-elite Thai workers of Bangkok's GRS clinics. The monograph may be improved if the clinic auxiliary staff were given more agency in the text through detailed and personable ethnographic analysis. The monograph's expressed focus is primarily the production of whiteness among Western patients seeking GRS; the clinics as theaters are described, on the one hand, through analysis of discourse and interviews with relatively privileged medical and administrative staff who produce clinics as sites of consumption. On the other hand, this is triangulated against experiences of their foreign customers. The political economy producing the migratory labor who become a clinic's auxiliary staff, and their workplaces which place heavy demands on their affective labor, are referenced though without much ethnographic material from the workers themselves. One is left wondering whether the industry's demand for its workers to 'orientalize' themselves (p. 188), as one mentioned example, could ever be subverted or, potentially, lead to alternative subjectivities for its auxiliary staff. In other words, while larger economic changes are mentioned, there is little room to consider potential shifts in the gender and sexual subjectivities of the non-elite staff, crucial to the clinic theater, as they interact with foreign clients and the relatively privileged local clinicians. Analyzing these changes might not only open pathways to the queer considerations of non-compliance and disruption within the clinics themselves but might also open pathways for one of the stated aims of the text: possible solidarities between the producers and consumers of globalized medical technologies.

This path unfollowed might have added to a broader analysis of the systems assembling the actors in the text, but its absence should in no way be interpreted as diminishing the power and provocation the text delivers on other counts. *Mobile Subjects* provides new insights relevant and challenging for those interested in a range of topics and methodologies. This is a required read for our times, not least for those scholars and students interested in queer, trans, and feminist theory and praxis; but too for those aiming to reconsider and challenge received notions of globalization, migration, and consumption.

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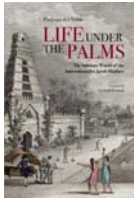
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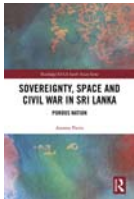
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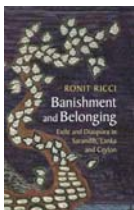
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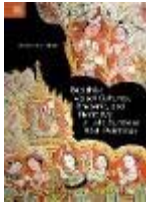
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