Journal of Critical Race Inquiry
Volume 7, Number 1 (2020) pp. 71-75

BOOK REVIEW

***Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment*, by Aizura, Z. A. (2018). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.**

Book Review Author:

Jacob Barry
Queen's University

Aren Z. Aizura's latest book, *Mobile Subjects*, explores the historical and contemporary significance of gender reassignment's relationship to various forms of mobility. Aizura critiques how the role of transnational geographical travel tropes influence the cultural and political intelligibility of gender reassignment. For Aizura, mobility takes on multiple meanings. The author not only considers mobility in terms of geographical or spatial travel, but social and economic movements as well. Aizura's engagement with mobility is informed by an insightful critique of the inherent relationship between mobility and settler colonialism. In this regard, Aizura outlines the impacts of various colonial projects and their role in shaping universalized sexual and gender categories. To unveil neoliberalism's production of an idealized Western liberal citizenship, Aizura *provincializes* origin stories of trans mobility. Aizura explains that, under European liberalism, the tendency to equate gender transition with mobility is reflective of the process of ascribing cultural, social, and racial capital to groups of people. This method stratifies access to various forms of mobility on the basis of individual capital.

Part I of the book examines representations of transsexuality using autobiographies from the 1960s to the 1990s, as well as documentary films produced in the early 2000s. Aizura analyses the racial and geographical specificity of how mobility produces different trans subjectivity formations. Aizura begins with an archival reading of Christine Jorgensen's experience, the first publicly known American transsexual. Although Jorgensen's experience has been heavily researched, Aizura's reading breathes new insights into Jorgensen's visibility. In conceptualizing Jorgensen as *ground zero*, or the starting point for transsexual visibility, Aizura highlights how Jorgensen's widely broadcasted return to the United States from Denmark informs the spatial and temporal structuring of gender reassignment. The transsexual narratives of departure and return are central to Jorgensen's story and shaped the

understanding of how trans individuals are authenticated only when they meet the demands of European liberal individualism (p. 31).

Under liberal individualism, travel narratives are used to evade *gender indeterminacy* (i.e., the idea that gender is not a stable or static category of identity). According to Aizura, this evasion allows transsexuality to become intelligible within the gender binary by creating a temporal gap between pre-operative and post-operative trans bodies. Moreover, he notes that in abiding to this imperialist division of “the world into a national *here* and a colonial *elsewhere*” (p. 32), social mobility can be obtained. To illustrate this concept, Aizura outlines how vacation and/or travel narratives, such as Jorgensen’s, facilitate the social legibility of trans individuals through privileging representations of whiteness as well as cis, trans, and hetero-normativity. The ability to be geographically mobile (i.e., containing gender indeterminacy within the *elsewhere*) results in constructing a narrative of transness that is embedded in Eurocentrism. Aizura highlights that all forms of mobility are contingent upon race, gender, class, sexuality, and nationality, and therefore cannot be universally defined. Aizura argues that restrictions to and/or the inaccessibility of mobility mediate one’s ability to engage with gender reassignment in the first place.

Through his detailed reading of two autobiographies, Jan Morris’s *Conundrum* and Deirdre McCloskey’s *Crossing*, Aizura notes how white transsexuality becomes legible by constructing racial differences as consumable. In *Conundrum*, Morris articulates the non-West as the space in which gendered transformations take place and through which her femininity can be affirmed. Aizura’s close reading of Morris’s autobiography illustrates Morris’ ability to maintain the white, masculine power dynamic of the West through her displacement of gender indeterminacy to the *elsewhere*, or the non-West. Moreover, Aizura notes how the appropriation and eroticization of racialized difference is used to construct and supplement the white femininity of trans patients. This appropriation is illustrated through both Morris’s articulation of people of colour and chapter five’s discussion of the affective labour that occurs in Thai clinics. Additionally, Aizura provides readers with a critical analysis of how McCloskey’s *Crossing* co-opts racialized conceptions of migrants and immigration to explain how gender transformation seems to move across spaces. As white transsexual women, Aizura argues, Morris and McCloskey’s appropriation of racial differences carries a weight of violence and seeks to make invisible the legacy of systems of oppression, such as racism and colonialism.

Continuing a discussion on colonial racial privilege, chapter three examines documentary films (e.g., *Gender Redesigner*, *Bubot Niyar*, and *Les travesti pleurent aussi*) where transgender and gender non-confirming individuals engage in transnational and rural-to-

urban migration in search of gender reassignment. Aizura uses the metronormative migration plot—the idea that transnational and rural-to-urban migration offers the possibility of liberty, freedom, and a higher quality of life—to showcase how the Global North and urban areas are depicted as more livable for trans and gender non-conforming people than the Global South and rural areas. Each film is explored independently, as well as in contrast to one another, to highlight representations of travel that promote a “there-and-backness” narrative, but also to dismantle the assumption that all trans people are mobile. In contrasting *Gender Redesigner* with *Bubot Niyar* and *Les travesti pleurent aussi*, Aizura reveals the hypervisibility of transfeminine people, in particular those of colour. Whereas white transmasculine and transfeminine people are often represented as mobile, Black transfeminine people are portrayed as immobile and are dehumanized, racialized, and commodified through the ethnicization of their labour.

In Part II, Aizura explores how trans and gender non-confirming individuals utilize mobility to negotiate barriers of access and implementation for gender reassignment. To do so, Aizura examines transnational, national, and local formations of transition-related healthcare in Thailand. The author employs the methodological standpoint he calls “following the actors,” a means he uses to ground his research in the experiences of individuals who engage with institutional systems and technologies of gender reassignment (p. 135). By engaging ethnographically, Aizura gains valuable insights into how gender reassignment behaves as a “commodity, a right, and a service” (p. 13) through mobility.

Aizura’s depiction of Thailand as a Mecca of gender reassignment surgeries provincializes gender reassignment using an entrepreneurial consumer framework to examine the neoliberal and biomedical values of travel. Gender reassignment, under the guise of an entrepreneurial framework of self-improvement and reinvention, becomes marketed as an easily obtainable commodity. However, as clearly illustrated through Aizura’s analysis of Thai gender reassignment as both a phenomenon and a market, medical tourists are subject to far better treatment and technologies in relation to locals, such as those who identify as *kathoeys* (“lady boy”). According to Aizura, this differing access to care arises due to transnational, national, and local formations of transition-related healthcare. Furthermore, the marketing strategies used in transition-related healthcare, which rely on the commodification of labour, gender norms, and racial differences allow the bio-political production of specific trans subjectivities (p. 204). Trans and gender non-confirming bodies are sorted based on racialized biopolitical formations of authentic and valuable identities, which enables the racial and economic stratification of medical authority and access to transition-related care (p. 141). Aizura notes that such practices obscure the fact that self-determination does not account for

individuals who face various interlocking oppressions. However, Aizura's lack of engagement with the relationship between disability and mobility hinders an understanding of how body sovereignty greatly depends on available material practices and the ability to be mobile. Analyzing mobility within critical disability scholarship would further highlight the stratification of access to gender reassignment. Moreover, a deeper consideration is required for how settler colonialism produces the disabling conditions that cause varying levels of access to gender reassignment surgery, particularly on the local level. Through mobility, a specific trans subjectivity comes to be constructed as either authentic, visible and "real," or unnatural, oppositional, and/or "other" depending on their social, racial and economic capital. However, I also believe that this depends on one's ability to be mobile in the first place.

In the final pages of *Mobile Subjects*, Aizura brings the discussion of mobility full circle by highlighting the ways in which the past continues to haunt the present. Aizura illustrates how modern representations of trans and gender non-conforming individuals (e.g., the trans character present in the show *Sense8*) continue to reify European modernity's fixity on time and space as obtainable, visible, and encompassing. Aizura contrasts the work of gender non-conforming artists, such as Jai Arun Ravine and Tannia Tanwarin Sukkhapsit, to normative representations of transness to emphasize the importance of dismantling hierarchies of knowledge production that privilege whiteness and mobility. Aizura notes how the more recent focus on trans women of colour in trans cultural representations is structured around a neoliberal multiculturalism. To do so, the author references more modern representations of Black trans women, such as Janet Mock and Laverne Cox. Here "trans people of colour are championed as representatives of institutional diversity and required to perform more labor as such" (p. 90). By drawing the reader's attention to the continuous canonization of gender diversity as predominately white and cisnormative, Aizura brings the ongoing processes of settler colonialism and racism to the forefront. In doing so, Aizura shows that we have not yet arrived at the era of post trans regulation, post colonialism, and post slavery.

To conclude, *Mobile Subjects* is intentional and thoughtful in its application of interdisciplinary research. Despite Aizura's lack of engagement with the relationship between disability and mobility, he successfully weaves connections of historical and contemporary transnational imaginaries of gender reassignment to highlight how gender reassignment is culturally mediated, racially and economically stratified, and marketed as a commodity. Through his multi-method and intersectional approach, Aizura brings forth a conversation that simultaneously accounts for the impact of gender, race, and class on seeking out and obtaining gender reassignment technologies, as well as the varying policies, practices, and vernacular inherent to transnational study.

References

Aizura, Z. A. (2018). *Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.