

Aren Z. Aizura

Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment

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Quote:

“Mobile Subjects is an important and refreshing contribution to trans and gender-nonconforming studies and activism. It is an inclusive and descriptively deep project that responsibly introduces the broader community to the social realities and struggles of diverse and particular folks in the trans and gender-nonconforming community.”

Trans people's emergence as part of a globally recognizable social category has been accompanied by a history of hypervisibilityⁱ and medical pathologization.ⁱⁱ The word "trans" was reclaimed from the largely medical term "transsexuality," but not without continuing to be haunted by the complex medical, institutional, and social legacies that transsexuality imbued it with. Trans studies as an academic field and set of practices has been critical in reorienting the world's understanding of trans people away from being positioned as the object of a third-person, institutional gaze and, as Aren Aizura argues, away from being framed as the object of imperial thought. Trans studies has instead enabled us to develop a descriptively detailed social epistemology that is centered around the trans experience. Its primary source material is trans

people's own first-person, phenomenological, and often particularist understanding of ourselves. Regardless, the idea that "being trans" is a universal state that obtains in all possible environments is a myth propagated sometimes even in trans studies itself. This often takes the form of trans identity being positioned in opposition to or in support of the place occupied by the so-called "natural attitude."ⁱⁱⁱ Trans scholars such as Aizura, who look at the critical intersection of place, capital, mobility, and visibility to determine how various trans subject positions emerge, therefore push the discipline forward with the aim of denying the myth of trans universality.

In *Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment*, Aizura provides a careful, intersectional, historical account of various trans lives that seeks to promote particularist narratives over universalizing ones. This involves looking at how seemingly discordant accounts of trans identity work together to create dominant frameworks that are forced on trans people regardless of our ability to participate in or fully live up to them. Narratives around trans people, Aizura argues, position us either as the "subjects of psychiatry . . . dependent on medical authority to approve [us] for somatechnological body modifications . . . [or] as consumers of body modification as a commodity" (140). Consequently, trans folks who do not articulate their identities according to either of the above accounts, which together control the discourse of what Aizura calls the "Global North" (9), end up at a serious disadvantage. This disadvantage, for Aizura, is also a geographical one, and it results in certain trans folks becoming immobile, with their bodies subject to interpretive structures that are not their own.^{iv} For instance, Aizura highlights how San Francisco is typically associated with the consumerist model of trans identity. In the popular imagination, San Francisco is a place people travel to and from freely to

consume resources that assist in the transition process and to secure their identities. However, this myth of consumerist mobility, even in San Francisco, is false. Indeed, Aizura explains how trans health care "looks radically different [in San Francisco] when it is practiced in a sex-worker-operated drop-in center[,] . . . when it's part of an HIV prevention clinic[, or] . . . when it happens in a low-income clinic in a historically black neighborhood" (172). Each of these environments offers a more particular, local set of resources for people who do not always have the ability to freely travel and consume services. In Thailand, the *kathoey*' are even more limited in their ability to consume resources and fit into dominant medical paradigms, especially when they are pitted against longstanding Orientalist fantasies of feminine gender transition and modern-day policies that make medical care and resources prohibitively expensive.

Mobile Subjects is split into two parts, combining political and social narratives about gender care and transitioning with personal anecdotes that illustrate those narratives. Part I describes how geography (human and otherwise) creates disparate social realities. Part II walks alongside different people living in those realities. In chapter 1, Aizura confronts the legend crafted around the so-called "first" American trans woman, Christine Jorgensen, which proliferates among certain trans communities in the Global North. The Jorgensen legend fueled a mainstream narrative that, in order to be legitimately trans, one must embark on a medical journey toward successful self-transformation involving physical and social mobility. Such a narrative encourages trans people to remove themselves from ordinary social or work environments at the time when their medical gender transition, represented as a sexed transformation, occurs. This narrative works to resolve nontrans folks' fear around indeterminacy and functionally maintains

ordinary binary gender codes. The somatechnics,^{vi} as Aizura describes them, behind this narrative exclude multiple, largely nonwhite subjects who are unable to mobilize themselves.

In chapter 2, Aizura considers published biographies and autobiographies, particularly memoirs, as means by which "transsexuality was narrated" (60), beginning with the work of nineteenth-century sexologists and moving to trans people's own narratives. Even where trans memoirs replace pathologizing medical frameworks with the idea of neoliberal self-actualization through consumption, such memoirs retain the journey arc detailed in chapter 1. As exemplified in the memoirs of Jan Morris (circa mid 1970s), Jennifer McCloskey, and Jennifer Boylan (both circa early 2000s), many trans autobiographers mash their autobiography with travel autobiography in a way that generates an Orientalist frame. In this frame, relatively powerful, socially mobile, white trans folk seek reinvention in racialized locales such as Morocco or Thailand and liken their gender transition to immigration. As Aizura argues, trans autobiographers tend to see themselves crossing gender boundaries the way immigrants cross physical borders. The problem with this formulation is that such a smooth, one-time transition implies that one may "inhabit only one axis of identification at a time" (88), when many, if not most, trans folks worldwide must cope with the intersection of multiple racial, class-based, and material oppressions.

Chapter 3 goes into further detail around the "trans migration" (93) plot, delving into the topic of metronormativity, or the view that "migrating from rural to urban spaces . . . can offer the possibility of self-fulfillment" (96).^{vii} It strikingly compares the story of fAe, a trans man who travels from rural Pennsylvania to San Francisco to come out, and two documentaries: *Bubot Niyar*, which follows trans Filipina care workers in Israel who moonlight as drag queens, and *Les*

travestis pleurent aussi, which follows Ecuadorian travesti^{viii} sex workers living in a poor borough of Paris. In both *Bubot* and *Les travestis*, the protagonists seek a new life elsewhere in urban spaces that offer the opportunity for self-fulfillment. Whereas fAe is seen as a mobile master of his destiny, able to wrest control of his life by getting in his car and escaping rural Pennsylvania for San Francisco, both *Bubot* and *Les travestis* place an immobilizing Western gaze on the people they document. In *Bubot*, the Filipina care workers' femininity is constantly questioned, and, in *Les travestis*, the travestis are forced to respond to the frames placed on them by their customers and broader society.

Part II narrows from the broader historical and political analysis of part I to trans people's own stories about how medical and consumption models affect their mobility and self-conception. Chapter 4 considers how consumer demand for medical gender transitions has given rise to less restrictive trans health markets in the Global South for those who can afford them. Certain Thai gender-reassignment clinics, for example, are marketed explicitly to non-Thai trans audiences and are priced accordingly. Aizura interviews multiple trans people, mostly trans women from Australia, who have traveled to Thailand for medical gender transition. Each reiterates some version of the same narrative about being justifiably discontent with the rigidity and restrictiveness of the medicalized Australian gender care systems and preferring to embrace the "buying power" their status gives them in the Thai gender care context (165).

In chapter 5, Aizura critiques the Orientalist view of Thailand as a place of feminine affective labor^{ix} that confers nonmedical as well as medical benefits on the patients in its gender care clinics. This understanding of Thailand remains dominant in the international imagination, even

as Thai *kathoey* and Thai trans feminine people are unable to access similar clinics. Aizura notes that, short of offering a powerful alternative framework, Thai gender clinics often enforce Western conceptions of binary gender on trans patients that are incongruent with local Thai practices.

In the epilogue, Aizura reminds the reader that his ultimate aim is to use a "Marxian and critical race framework" to critique the way models of being trans are evaluated and discussed (209). Accordingly, he stresses that trans people are marginalized regardless of our social position and are not solely responsible for the perpetuation of oppressive, colonial, and universalizing frameworks, even if we participate in them. Further, those who are the most oppressed under such frameworks (for example, *kathoey* and other "immobile" folks) are neither foils for mobile folks nor tragic subjects relegated to the "waiting room of history" (210); rather, they are people with complex and differently articulable genders capable of resisting their own objectification via decolonizing projects, often through developing new forms of mobility.^x Aizura seeks to inform readers of how trans people may interact with consumerism, the Global North-South divide, and the sidelining of particularist discourses in favor of universalist, medical, and consumerist ones. Emphasizing mobility as a conduit for thinking through global trans identities is a brilliant move on Aizura's part, which enables the reader to integrate seemingly disparate discourses and traditions.

Mobile Subjects is a multifaceted, ambitious, and careful analysis of trans people's lived experiences and responses to the monolith of the medical and consumerist models of trans identity. As such, it is haunted by a Marxian^{xi} framework in a way that may benefit from being

made more explicit. Aizura is clear that trans folks are both implicated in capitalist projects of value-extraction and are simultaneously capable of exceeding such projects; however, *Mobile Subjects* could potentially benefit from additional Marxian signposting amid its detailed and wide-ranging descriptions of trans folks' experiences. Aizura's writing is particularly effective in that it imbues a Marxian framework with a queer-of-color-style critique such that his account emphasizes how "capitalism itself [responsively] engenders . . . 'emergent social formulations' that destabilize [racist and colonial] regimes of thought [around gender]" (20). *Kathoey*, for instance, revolutionize global systems by promoting Thai ways of understanding gender difference in opposition to binary medical discourses around transitioning and passing that occur in Thai gender-transition clinics. In short, *kathoey* "talk back" to their being framed as immobile, affective (care) laborers and thus engage in what Ian Hacking would refer to as an unmasking project (Hacking 1999), which reveals the violent and avoidable social forces operating behind *kathoey*'s seemingly inevitable self-exoticization. In fact, many of the trans narratives that Aizura describes as masked and made invisible under dominant consumerist and mobility frameworks involve trans feminine people being immobilized as affective laborers. *Mobile Subjects* opens up the possibility for a further set of Marxian projects to be developed around the role of affective labor among trans feminine people.^{xii}

In part II, Aizura engages in a methodology he calls "following the actors" (135) via tracking large-scale institutions not holistically but rather through individual institutional actors (for example, "patients, care workers, surgeons, etc." [136]). It is in this portion of *Mobile Subjects* that Aizura's Marxian- and queer-of-color-inspired critique begins to truly shine. Some of the themes he approaches include: how somatechnics influences capitalist thinking around gender

transition (56); how "gender indeterminacy" haunts such thinking (38); how to avoid Spivak's warning about engaging in "mere political avant-gardism" by excluding queer-of-color critique (20); and how biopolitics fits in with all of this (207).

In conclusion, I want touch on one element of Aizura's discussion that in many ways frames the others: that of hypervisibility. Aizura alludes to how visibility issues affect both traditionally mobile hypervisible trans feminine subjects from the Global North and trans women immigrants, who are sometimes made invisible in affective labor economies and whose mobility is less traditionally obvious. Relatedly, Aizura takes care to note that trans men are neither as immobilized nor as hypervisible as trans women from all groups, from those fulfilling the Jorgenson arc to those in affective labor economies, all of whom are additionally affected by trans-misogynist narratives that place them under the male gaze. Trans men, per Aizura, conversely "tend to occupy positions of researcher or professional expert" (11) and so are often allowed to stay in the background, but in a way that affords us a degree of autonomy. Of the rich and varied narratives investigated in *Mobile Subjects*, one of the few that concerns a trans man's life is the film *Gender Redesigner*,^{xiii} which follows fAe's metronormative narrative of moving to San Francisco to medically transition. *Gender Redesigner* is one of the more mainstream narratives Aizura's work covers, a fact I find interesting and perhaps not unsurprising. Aizura himself notes that there is a gap surrounding narratives involving trans men, particularly around their "obtaining gender reassignment somatechnologies in Thailand" (198). He attributes this to the prohibitive expense of gender-care surgeries for trans men and the lack of doctors who perform them. Based on one Singaporean trans man's account, he also notes that transmasculine patients tend to exoticize and demand affective labor of Thai caregivers, similarly to, or more

intensively than, trans women. This is a point I believe is worth developing further. Clearly, trans men interact with the same universalizing narratives as trans women but with different kinds of baggage, informed by patriarchal systems. I largely agree with Aizura that transfeminine hypervisibility is a pervasive and complex issue that does not imply transmasculine invisibility. However, I am curious as to how transmasculine mobility narratives may differ from the former and work (or not work) with Aizura's recuperative, particularist framework. The brilliance of *Mobile Subjects* is that its framework may be extrapolated for the purposes of understanding a multitude of actors through varied political, social, and individual concerns, and this is one possible extrapolation.

Mobile Subjects is one of the more theoretically and historically complex cultural studies to emerge in recent years on the topic of trans identity. It significantly advances the dialogue around the term and concept *trans*, especially beyond the universal, somatechnological narratives of trans embodiment and the mobility narrative that surrounds us. As such, it is an important text for many different kinds of readers. First, it is one of the more comprehensive transfeminist cultural studies I have encountered and provides a careful and updated account of many trans women's lives and needs. It thus has the ability to inform a multitude of trans-inclusive feminist projects both within philosophy and in the broader academic and activist communities. In particular, it can provide significant assistance to projects surrounding establishing first-person authority over gender and understanding the social metaphysics of gender and race. It has further applications in queer-of-color and decolonial studies, affective labor theory, and feminist philosophy of medicine. It also ought to be mandatory reading for medical practitioners and administrators involved in institutional gender care. Finally, it serves as a valuable resource for

trans people considering medical gender care (such as myself) looking to pursue gender-care options, especially those in a position of relative privilege vis-à-vis the majority of trans folks who are not. *Mobile Subjects* is an important and refreshing contribution to trans and gender-nonconforming studies and activism. It is an inclusive and descriptively deep project that responsibly introduces the broader community to the social realities and struggles of diverse and particular folks in the trans and gender-nonconforming community.

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ⁱ Trans women of color are particularly and especially subject to hypervisibility. The 2015 Report of the U.S. Transgender Survey, for instance, documents that trans women of color are subjected to "pervasive mistreatment and violence" compounded by "severe economic hardship and instability . . . [and] other forms of discrimination" for their visibility within different institutional social structures (James et al. 2016, 2-4). Aizura clarifies how, outside of the US, this problem worsens or at least becomes more complicated.

ⁱⁱ For instance, the World Professional Association of Transgender Health (WPATH), formerly the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, has produced a set of guidelines regarding standards of care for medical-care teams and practitioners involved in gender-based care of trans and gender nonconforming people (WPATH 2011). Although he was a pioneer of transsexual surgery, Harry Benjamin also held eugenic ideas about reproduction, which evolved into trans people historically being denied reproductive rights. Further, per Aizura, Benjamin was central in developing oppressive ideas about who counted as a "'true' or primary, transsexual" (60).

ⁱⁱⁱ As Talia Mae Bettcher describes, the "natural attitude" (cf. Harold Garfinkel) is a dominant social view that there are "two naturally mutually exclusive, exhaustive, and invariant sexes, and membership within a sex is determined by genitalia" (Bettcher 2007, 48). Many trans scholars question whether referring to decontextualized, stable subject positions in relation to gender is even possible. See, for example, Halberstam 2018.

^{iv} As Aizura notes, even in his own experience with the Australian Monash Gender Dysphoria Clinic (now strategically renamed the Monash Health Gender Clinic), it was difficult to be accepted for medical therapies and interventions due to the narrow narratives that patients are forced to tell. In contexts such as this, it is nearly impossible to articulate one's gender-nonconforming identity in a way that justifies access to medical resources.

^v According to Aizura, the Thai term *kathoey* is roughly approximate to "male-to-female transgender" but is used in a historically unique sense (239). Many prefer the term *sao prophet song*, literally "second type of woman."

^{vi} "Somatechnics," per Aizura's referencing Susan Stryker, is the stance that "the material intelligibility of the body (soma) [is] inseparable from the techniques and technologies through which bodies are formed and transformed" (56).

^{vii} I myself have often been asked how difficult it was for me to move from my hometown, a large urban center, to a smaller town. The fact that, initially, I came out as transmasculine only after having moved to a relatively small, conservative city surprises many.

^{viii} According to Romania, one of the people documented in *Les Travestis*, travestis are not identical with the Western idea of a trans person. To Romania, they are a "third sex," an existence she refers to as "magical" (quoted in Aizura, 123). Indeed, throughout *Mobile Subjects*, Aizura demonstrates that the Western obsession with sex and gender as differentiable by genitalia versus social style is a much more local concept than many in thrall to Garfinkel's natural attitude want to believe.

^{ix} Thai women, trans, *kathoey*, or otherwise, employed in "gender care clinics" such as the Suporn Clinic are called upon both to provide comfortable and even luxurious experiences whereby patients' (typically trans women's) needs are catered to 24/7 following sex-change surgery and to model norms of feminine behavior and expression.

^x Throughout the text, Aizura describes numerous instances of trans people resisting their own commodification. In the film *Bubot Niyar*, for example, Sally tells Heymann (the filmmaker) that she is "one hundred percent" woman because neither he nor Neil have encountered her penis (quoted in Aizura, 119). This enables her to control the discourse surrounding her body, the space around it, and its availability to others. Another example of trans people resisting their own commodification is how *kathoey* Thai folks often refuse surgery and laugh at the idea that they should have to see a psychiatrist to be approved for it, all despite not being able to access expensive medical treatments aimed at Westerners (182). Meanwhile, poet Jai Arun Ravine and others challenge the idea that Thailand is accepting of *kathoey/sao prophet song/trans* people (215).

^{xi} Although Aizura does not actually define "Marxian," Marxian thinking commonly refers to an economic school of thought, as opposed to Marxism, which is the much more popular term for the class-based political philosophy.

^{xii} So, for instance, Aizura references the queer-of-color critique provided by artists Arun Ravine and Tannia Tanwarin Sukkhapsit in the films *Tom/Trans/Thai* and *I'm Fine (Sa-bai-dee-kha!)*, respectively. It is unclear how either of these fit into Marxian critiques of economic capitalism, but there is clearly potential to that end. Not all of Aizura's frameworks are going to be appropriately brought to bear in all instances, but there may be some benefit to more explicit signposting.

^{xiii} In the epilogue, Aizura discusses the film *Tom/Trans/Thai*, which follows gender-nonconforming artist Arun Ravine's transmasculine journey. I do not want to do violence to Ravine's narrative and experiences by framing them as those of a trans man, even if they feature common trans masculine embodied themes.