

Book Review | *Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment*, by Aren Z. Aizura
(Duke University Press, 2020)

K.S. Shindle

Indiana University

katshin@iu.edu

Aren Aizura's *Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment* considers what mobility and capital mean for transgender and gender nonconforming individuals. Specifically, Aizura argues that privilege—in particular class, racial, and nationality privilege—protects some trans people over others. Ultimately, mobility is capital, and capital is not available to all trans people. Through a profusion of methods, Aizura posits that the “journey” of a neoliberal normative transsexuality can only exist through gender liminality in the “elsewhere” (3), meaning that a physical journey is necessary for gendered bodily transformation to occur within neoliberal frameworks of what it means to be transgender. He argues that the liminal gender/sex that trans people experience during their transition, where outward sex characteristics and gender are not fully aligned, can only exist outside of the Global North, specifically in the orientalist vision of the East, and that they can only return once they have “created” their new body and gender. Pulling from scholars occupying a wide range of disciplines and methodologies, including a multisited ethnography and semiotic and rhetorical analyses, Aizura primarily uses critical race studies and Marxist theory, but also insights from trans studies, STS studies, transnational feminism, queer theory, feminist geography, and queer/trans migration and diaspora to support his argument. While Aizura does not cite some of the canonical scholars in critical

Shindle, K.S. 2021. Review of *Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment*, by Aren Z. Aizura (Duke University Press, 2020). *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 7 (1): 1–5.

<http://www.catalystjournal.org> | ISSN: 2380-3312

© K.S. Shindle, 2021 | Licensed to the Catalyst Project under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives license

race studies and Marxist theory, the influence of these analytics is clear, even to the uninitiated.

Aizura's book is divided into two sections according to the methodologies he employs. Part I utilizes a close reading of trans travel narratives, autobiography and memoir, and documentaries, performing semiotic and rhetorical analyses to show the ways that transgender migration is portrayed. Part II draws on Aizura's field research interviewing trans and gender nonconforming subjects in Australia and Los Angeles, considering gender reassignment surgeries, trans and gender nonconforming individuals who underwent gender reassignment surgery in Australian and Thai contexts, with particularly compelling material from interviews of both patients and workers at Thai gender reassignment clinics. Aizura calls this method "following the actors" to create a "multisited ethnography," which acknowledges the temporality of space (15–16). This format works to set the stage for Aizura's argument in the first half through a more historical context, and then to show how these patterns have continued, strengthening his overall claim that to fit in the neoliberal model of gender transition, trans people must experience their physical transition elsewhere.

Starting in Denmark with the icon of gender reassignment surgery, Christine Jorgensen, Aizura uses multiple texts to trace Jorgensen's 1952 journey to Copenhagen for surgery as an allegory to explain the construction of trans "journey" narratives. Ongoing invocations of Jorgensen's transition ultimately show how, through neoliberal imaginations of "self-transformation," trans and gender nonconforming people can create themselves and their gender (45–48). However, Jorgensen's narrative only works through her existing privilege, including her racial and class privilege in the United States, which allowed her to make the journey to Denmark, where her "gender indeterminacy" could live until she occupied a more normative gender, at which time she could make her journey back home (39, 45–48).

Turning next to Casablanca, Morocco, Aizura explores the gendered-orientalizing role that movement to the "exotic" East has on crafting white, Western trans narratives, through four different autobiographies: *April Ashley's Odyssey* by April Ashley, *Coccinelle* by Coccinelle, *Second Serve* by Renée Richards, *Conundrum* by Jan Morris, and *My Story* by Caroline Cossey. Trans people, in particular trans feminine people, have historically migrated and traveled to Casablanca for gender reassignment surgery. This analysis hinges on Edward Said's analysis of the East

as feminine in contrast to the masculine West, allowing for a gender transformation to occur simultaneously with trans travel to the East. This migration to the feminized Casablanca allows for trans and gender nonconforming individuals to embody femininity through the feminine orientalism of the East, so that they can properly perform femininity when they return to the West (75). Aizura explores how trans memoirs integrate the imagined feminine subjects of the Orient in their narratives, allowing them to embody womanhood in ways unimaginable in the Western context. This use of Said's understandings of orientalism and femininity as a way to facilitate gender transition is incredibly compelling and novel, and particularly useful in the latter section of *Mobile Subjects*.

Aizura's final chapter in this section considers documentary films of trans migration—*Gender Redesigner*, *Bubot Niyar*, and *Les travestis pleurent aussi [sic]*—that exemplify how trans migrations can exist within the Global North, but reproduce the same concepts in the West to East migrations explored earlier. For instance, Aizura specifically draws from Jack Halberstam's concept of "metronormativity," which maps queer and trans narratives of belonging and migration from the rural to the urban (96–97). This section describes more modern examples of trans narratives, which aids the book's transition into Part II, where Aizura analyzes modern conceptions of trans and gender nonconforming transformations.

Such insights about the contexts under which transnational trans geographies of movement emerge become key to Part II of *Mobile Subjects*, which looks at current trans lives and experiences in gender reassignment clinics. Aizura questions what these narratives produce when they indulge in orientalism. In the most compelling chapter of the book, "Transnational Entrepreneurialisms," Aizura describes how trans people from Australia and the US think about and use Thai gender reassignment clinics to show how privilege and transnationalism function in access to care. Aizura describes the neoliberal nature of trans narratives surrounding gender reassignment surgery in Thailand, where consumerism drives the trans and gender nonconforming surgical market, and where, with enough money, you can have the "correct" gender normative body. This creates a "entrepreneurialism of the self," where the management of bodies, including trans bodies, relies on the "individual moral responsibility" touted by neoliberalism (141–43).

In part, Global North trans people see Thailand as a surgical paradise because

their options in their own country are completely inadequate, through non-subsidized healthcare, no doctors who specialize in trans care (or none who are reputable), excessive gatekeeping to access services, or a combination of these. Aizura describes the US medical system, based on a clinical model, where transness is a problem to be treated through medical intervention. As trans healthcare is largely privatized, this means it is only available to trans people who can afford it or can afford health insurance which will (hopefully) cover (some) of it (146). In contrast, other places run trans healthcare through their governments, including South Africa and Australia. Aizura describes Australia's trans healthcare systems in great detail, having navigated this system himself. Since trans healthcare is centralized, it allowed for doctors to execute greater gatekeeping over their patients, since trans patients have to go through this one system to access care.

Gender reassignment services in Thailand, conversely, are incredibly consumer motivated and typically advertise toward trans feminine people. While the origins of Thailand as a gender reassignment surgery haven are unknown, some speculate that the advent of the internet, or perhaps *kathoey* (Thai trans feminine people) who emigrated elsewhere helped create this narrative. Surgeons highlight outstanding services available to their patients, including state-of-the-art resorts, activities, tourist trips, among others. They also brag about the inclusive nature of Thailand, where trans people are treated as "normal." However, as Aizura describes, this is not always the case, especially for the *kathoey* and *tom* (Thai trans masculine people) who live there.

While patients recover, Thai woman and *kathoey* workers at these resorts must perform the affective labor of being patients' friends, helping them perform femininity to make them feel the experiences of being a "true" woman as their bodies make this transition (196). This helps complete the "self-orientalization" of the trans patients, where their journey to Thailand propels them to embody the femininity of the East (179, 188, 191), playing into Puar's "colonial tourism," where colonial tropes are replicated through Global North tourism (180). Mobility as capital has a deep lineage.

Ultimately, Aizura asserts that he is not looking to hold trans and gender nonconforming people accountable for the long legacy of colonialism underlying categories of "transgender," but rather to show how the discourses and narratives around these identities were inevitable based on colonial histories. Moreover, he emphasizes the inadequacy of current gender reassignment surgery options for many people, and the ways that these surgeries are still stigmatized (204).

Mobile Subjects ends by analyzing the television show *Sense8* to imagine a new form of trans “worlding,” where trans people would have the ability to act and be acted upon in the world through the development of trans intersubjectivity (210). In this new world, trans people are allowed to be transformative, and not fixed within rigid understandings of gender and subjectivity. Additionally, Aizura foregrounds non-white, non-Western understandings of trans identity through the artistic works of Arun Ravine and Tannia Tanwarin Sukkhapsit to center Thai understandings of gender and subjectivity in contrast to the Global North orientalism *Mobile Subjects* focuses on. Finally, he points towards new work that will look at reproductive and affective labor as not just impacting cis women, but as pervading a transnational queer and trans “chain of care,” and calls for the analysis of “minor mobilities” (196, 219).

Given Aizura’s diverse methodology, scholars in a wide range of fields will find this book useful. Most notably, *Mobile Subjects* exemplifies what can be done when trans studies is integrated with science, technology, and society studies, and more “traditional” gender studies theories, such as queer theory, transnational feminisms, and Marxist theory. Scholarship in this vein seems to be proliferating currently, especially with the release of *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Gill-Peterson, 2018) and *Going Stealth: Transgender Politics and US Surveillance Practices* (Beauchamp, 2019). These books signal a new field: transgender science and technology studies, emphasizing critical race studies and transnational politics. Aizura’s text specifically speaks to the lack of current scholarship intersecting transnational feminisms and trans studies. Scholars across these fields should pay attention to see how Aizura and his colleagues continue to build the foundation for this exciting area of study.

Author Bio

K.S. Shindle is a third-year Gender Studies graduate student at Indiana University. Their research examines the pathologization of trans identity and gender dysphoria through STS, trans studies, and critical race theory.