

Book Review: *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of the Law* by Dean Spade (South End Press, 2011)

LIES Collective

2012

Dean Spade presents *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of the Law* as an intervention at a critical moment in the articulation of an autonomous trans political practice. In 2012, trans political formations risk repeating the strategies and pitfalls of mainstream gay and lesbian rights organizations that have sought inclusion in a class protected by “hate crimes” legislation and protection from “discrimination” including discrimination constituted by exclusion from state-sanctioned marriage and the military. According to *Normal Life* these are wrong-headed goals first, because they don’t work to provide the protections their proponents claim they provide. Employment discrimination and hate-bias have been defined in such a way that they are very difficult to prove and hate-crime and anti-discrimination laws have not succeeded in deterring interpersonal violence or employment discrimination. Second, these strategies direct both resources and a veneer of ethical legitimacy toward the expansion of a state punishment apparatus that targets trans and GLQ people disproportionately and the heteropatriarchal and racist-imperialist institutions of marriage and the military.

Given the absolute inefficacy of these strategies and their role in perpetuating racialized and gendered state violence, *Normal Life* explains organizations like the HRC and GLAAD’s concentration on these strategies by noting how they fit into a thirty-year-old process of the “non-profitization” of activism that covers up the immense rise in racialized and gendered rates of imprisonment, wealth inequity, the dismantling of the social safety net and the demise of labor unionism and radical activism. This process has been enacted by a class of college-educated and disproportionately white non-profit employees who are deferential to their wealthy patrons and prioritize short-term “band-aid” projects that give the illusion that something is being done to address social inequity while not agitating for structural change and indeed casting those who do demand such change as impractical. In resistance to this window dressing non-solution, *Normal Life* proposes a trans politics that decenters legal work, builds leadership from the constituencies of the organizations, de-professionalizes these positions and collectivizes skills. These kinds

of political projects will note the structural connections between trans resistance and projects to abolish prisons, end immigration enforcement, and redistribute wealth through taxation and funding social programs. *Normal Life* observes that the interconnectedness of these struggles lies in the way in which race, immigration status, and gender are used as administrative categories to form population groupings of people that ground state policies that support the wellness and wealth of anglo, male, and cis people and the unemployment, imprisonment, and sickness of communities of color, women, and trans people through the rapid growth in the production of prisons, the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border, the dismantling of social programs, and the state's collusion with capitalist interests. Substantial change in the position of racialized populations, women and trans people will require the dismantling of these interlocked systems.

Normal Life provides a succinct and insightful account of the way in which identities that grounded the liberation politics of the late sixties have been de-toothed and whitewashed by the non-profit cooptation of struggle, and a convincing and clear picture of how movements can re-take the histories of struggle in the name of alliances and direct actions that center the needs of those made most vulnerable by capitalist white-supremacist hetero-patriarchy. I have two points that I would ask Dean Spade to consider. First, the text routinely contrasts the mainstream establishment gay non-profit industrial complex with an emergent radical trans and queer politics. This historical framing is inadequate. Both radical and conservative tendencies in gay, lesbian, queer and trans political and social circles have always existed in uneasy relation to one another. Radical politics have not always correlated with trans or queer identities and, likewise, conservative politics have not correlated with lesbian and gay identity. For instance a group of white trans women called COG (Conversion Our Goal) formed in San Francisco in the 1960s to aid police chief Elliot Blackstone in formulating SFPD community policing policies effectively legitimizing the transphobic, racist, and sexist SFPD in the wake of community resistance. Wealthy gay and trans people have always used the security that money provides in a capitalist society to lessen their exposure to violence. Rather than understanding radical politics in resistance to non-profits, we should understand the centering of marriage equality and other class and race-blind gay rights projects as perfectly logical extensions of the tradition of gay, lesbian, queer and trans efforts to assimilate and access the protections that assimilation provides. Likewise, there have always been lesbian, trans, queer, and gay people involved in resisting capitalism, imperialism, white supremacy and patriarchy. Current radical struggles like those that Spade promotes represent the extension of these struggles. Sylvia Rivera had solidarity with the Young Lords and the Black Panther Party was in dialogue with the Gay Liberation Front. These have been and are one struggle and the absolute antagonism between this history of radical resistance and the interests of rich queers is an old and predictable fissure that shouldn't surprise or worry us anymore. GLAAD and HRC are irrelevant. The most pernicious function they can play is to serve as straw men that comfort queers and trans people who can limit their political engagement to critique of these organizations' conservative agendas and feel radical and vindicated. Redraw the lines of dialogue.

This leads to my second point. *Normal Life's* promotion of wealth redistribution seems to negate any revolutionary politic.¹ Here too, the problem is one of historical interpretation. When Spade characterizes "the political upheaval of the 1960's and 1970's, [as] strong social justice movements' [voicing] demands for redistribution and transformation [that] gained visibility and

¹ See the W.&T.C.H. piece in this issue for a critique of wealth redistribution.

[then] were systematically attacked by Cointelpro” he forgets that these social justice movements had no faith in the ability of the state to “redistribute” resources (56). Rather, these movements armed themselves for revolution and developed community structures to meet their own needs for food, education and protection from the police. Today, once we’re freed of dialogue with conservative groups and the political ties that bind such dialogue: what is to be done? How will we begin to voice an unapologetic and menacing antagonism to the current state of things under capitalism and ready ourselves for the practical struggles that are even now making themselves visible in the streets of the world’s cities? This is where the dialogue should be: with critical trans politics as a component of revolutionary political formations that see the abolition of prisons, borders, patriarchy and white supremacy as the real work of ending capitalism.

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Retrieved on 5 November 2023 from liesjournal.net/volume1-16-bookreview.html

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