

Book Review Symposium – Queer Geographies

Ann Travers, *The Trans Generation: How Trans Kids (and Their Parents) are Creating a Gender Revolution*, New York: NYU Press, 2018. ISBN: 9781479885794 (cloth); ISBN: 9781479840410 (paper)

In *The Trans Generation*, sociologist Ann Travers applies feminist theory to advocate for safe spaces for transgender (trans) youth to explore and express their identity. The book, written for a popular and academic audience, aims to improve the lives of trans youth by sharing their stories from across a range of everyday spaces and places and analyzing their effects on policies. Travers defines “transgender” in a broad and historical sense to include people who “defy societal expectations regarding gender” (p.2).

Drawing upon longitudinal interviews with 36 trans children, ages four to 20, as well as detailed reviews of legal and policy documents, the central argument of *The Trans Generation* is that the lack of supportive spaces is dis-abling for trans youth and affects their precarity. Further, the resources providing trans youth with supportive spaces are unevenly distributed, namely in regards to race and class. To capture a broad swath of trans experience, the participants are from Canada and the United States with a variety of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. The findings are strategically organized across the five chapters, four of which cover common sites of exclusion/violence for trans youth in order to emphasize the importance of and need for “safe spaces”. These safe spaces are already prevalent in and a complement to the geographies of sexualities literature and trans studies more broadly, which include the often written about spaces of schools, public spaces (bathrooms and locker rooms), spaces with parents, and healthcare.

To pinpoint where feelings of vulnerability stem from and how these feelings influence the livability of trans lives, Travers concentrates on the childhood of trans people because, as they explain, “[a]nalyzing children as a socially constructed minority group subject to, and

implicated in, relations of oppression is a central piece of the puzzle in order to understand trans kids and all their complexity” (p.41). Through the use of interviews, Travers was able to capture the childhood of trans youth from a multitude of angles and apply a social action model of research¹ that is “explicitly designed to develop knowledge that can be used to fight oppression” (p.10). Specifically, Travers outlines and uses sources that dis-able and affect the precarity of trans youth, drawing attention to the positive correlation between supportive space and the opportunities for trans youth to flourish. For example, children who had a school staff that worked with them to change their gender markers on records felt more comfortable with their identity than children whose affirmed gender staff refused to be acknowledge.

Evidence that unevenly distributed resources are restricting for trans youth, particularly in regard to class, is most supported when observing trans youth’s access to proper healthcare. Findings from Travers’ research show that trans youth from middle- to upper-class families will be more likely to thrive due to their parents having the financial means for healthcare, education, and social care, which can help in turn diminish the feelings of vulnerability and insecurity.

Two participant’s stories particularly stand out and best capture the impact that class comparatively makes to trans youths’ ability to thrive, or even to survive. Greg and Nathan are two white, female-to-male transgender youth living in major cities with very different class backgrounds. Greg came from a family who was able to afford treatment that helped him feel like his affirmed gender, while Nathan’s could not afford to do the same. Although Greg experienced negativity from peers, he was never driven into a deep depression that led to self-harm like in Nathan’s case. While medications and surgeries will not solve all of the problems trans kids encounter, they will allow them to be more comfortable in their own skin, which can significantly decrease rates of anxiety and depression. Unfortunately, because of the lack affordability and access to supportive healthcare, there are many children who are forced to suffer in a body that does not reflect their identity.

1 On which see <http://communitydevtheories.blogspot.com/2010/10/social-action-model.html>

Travers continuously emphasizes the parent's role in a child's life, which is of course a central force and yet has received less attention in other studies. While the courage and strength trans youth need to survive in heteronormative everyday spaces should not be marginalized, the support and dedication of their parents should be praised. Travers does an excellent job doing so by including their participants' parents' perspective as well. The story of Isabella (Bella) Burgos, a young trans girl, demonstrates that the persistence of parents could greatly impact livability not only for their trans child, but also for other current and future trans youth. Bella's parents recognized the denial of support for their daughter's gender identity as a violation of her human rights. They were able to take action and file a lawsuit, *Elizabeth Burgos V. River East Transcona School District*, in Winnipeg, Canada, which allowed trans students to use the bathroom that they identify with. An attention to the parent's role in the livability of trans youth contributes greatly to Travers' ability to reach a diverse audience and provides encouragement for all adults to actively participate in recognizing and stepping in when the human rights of youth are being violated.

Travers determined that Canadian policies toward trans youth are notably more progressive than those in the United States: Canada's Bill C-16, passed in 2016, included gender-identity protection in the human rights code, better access to more affordable supportive healthcare, and a third gender option for official forms. The effect of this more forward-thinking response is seen with the surveys Travers included as "10% of LGBTQ students and 17% of trans students reported hearing homophobic and transphobic remarks from teachers and school staff" (p.49) in Canada compared to the "63% of LGBTQ students in this study [who] reported hearing negative remarks about gender expression from teachers and school staff" (p.50) in the United States. (In comparison, the more recent April 2019 trans military ban in the United States makes this comparison of trans protections and support even more obvious [see Lang 2019].)

Travers does a wonderful job providing insights on various ways to help make the lives of trans youth more livable by drawing attention to how having more agency allows them to thrive across these range of geographies. They pay close attention to the negative consequences

of poverty and gendered violence that need to be addressed in order for these children to experience safety, or at least the promise of safety. Finally, while I was persuaded about Travers' point for supporting trans youth in a range of everyday geographies, the argument for a vague construct of "safety" weakened their arguments. American studies scholar Christina Hanhardt's *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* (2013) demonstrates that "safe" spaces are most often the purview of white, middle- and upper-class bodies. Returning to my previous critique, by taking a more detailed transactional perspective, Travers could have better demonstrated who "safety" was available to through supportive resources, and how those structures are largely not available to Black and brown people and working-class and poor people more broadly.

Overall, this book strongly and clearly introduces the everyday challenges that trans youth face and proves that the shift to include more gender-neutral spaces is crucial to making their lives – and all lives – more livable. That said, the book is an especially strong text for teaching introductions to gender, women's and sexuality studies courses or mid-level undergraduate courses on geographies of gender and sexuality, as well as a public audience. Travers included a detailed appendix of key terms, definitions, and resources that gives readers who are not as familiar with the topic of transgender a point of reference. This appendix, like the rest of *The Trans Generation*, allows the reader to have access insights and materials that may help to improve the lives of trans youth. Travers thoughtfully gives life to their participants' voices and provides another resource for the trans community to strengthen their support systems and encourage trans youth to explore and express their identity.

References

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