

*Book Review Symposium – Queer Geographies*

**C. Riley Snorton**, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-1-5179-0173-8 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-5179-0172-1 (cloth)

In the spring of 2018, a national debate raged in the United States around the removal of national monuments that glorify the subjugation of people of color from public spaces. It was then that a statue of J. Marion Sims (1813-1883), lauded as the “father of modern gynecology”, was removed from New York City’s Central Park. Sims’ statue was a posthumous tribute for his work in the mid-1800s during which he treated vesicovaginal fistulas, a wound that developed between the bladder and vagina after childbirth. Yet, Sims’ search for a medical breakthrough came at the expense of painful and multiple experiments on the readily available flesh of enslaved women who suffered from the condition and were considered as damaged property. In *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, C. Riley Snorton explains that Sims’ experimentation on enslaved women was another mode of forced labor by putting their damaged bodies to work for the purpose of extracting medical knowledge. The protest and removal of Sims’ statue is one of many instances today in which North America has been forced to contend with the embodied and placed evidence of its racist past and present.

These encounters with the past are the basis of Snorton’s *Black on Both Sides*. The book is a historiography of a Black trans existence before the possibilities of institutional recognition, and shows how transness and blackness “are brought into the same frame by the various ways they have been constituted as fungible, thingified, and interchangeable” (p.6), particularly during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> to late 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As a communication and cultural studies scholar, Snorton’s work is especially interesting to geographers looking at US nationalism and exceptionalism, as

well as Black geographies and geographies of sexualities. Drawing foremost upon Black feminist thought and queer, trans, disability, and literary theories, Snorton asks:

What pasts have been submerged and discarded to solidify – or, more precisely, indemnify – a set of procedures that would render blackness and transness as distinct categories of social valuation? Relatedly, what insights are yielded in a reading of “black” and “trans” that do not regard these as social markers that are manifestly transparent? ... What does it mean to have a body that has been made into a grammar for whole worlds of meaning? (p.7, 11)

Snorton provides some possible answers to these important questions through a trans reading of an array of archival materials, including medical illustrations, photographs, autobiographies, film, and news media content to illustrate how transness and blackness have historically materialized simultaneously. Snorton draws heavily from Hortense Spillers’ and Sylvia Wynter’s work on race, gender, and coloniality to center the early arguments of *Black on Both Sides* that bind blackness and transness in the United States: under colonialism and slavery, gender’s structures of meaning are disarticulated for Black people, and, in the aftermath, gender as an identity category is, at best, unstable and mutable. Gender’s mutability and the unsettled temporalities of collateral genealogies produce interstitial sites where “livable black and trans worlds” (p.14) have proliferated.

The first three chapters of *Black on Both Sides* attend to the reordering of the sex and gender of Black people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century under slavery, through a trans reading of Black literature and Black people in literature. The first chapter on Sims and the enslaved women he experimented on – “Anarcha, Betsey, Lucy, and the unnamed others” (p. 18) – demonstrates how they were “nobodies according to the precepts of law and medicine” (p.31). As no/bodies, they were rendered “ungendered” (p.19) and nonhuman, making them ideal bodies for Sims’ experiments. Relatedly, the second chapter, “Trans Capable: Fungibility, Fugitivity, and the

Matter of Being”, explores how this “ungendered blackness” (p.58) made it possible for Black people to escape slavery through “cross-dressing” (p.63). Then, in the third chapter, “Reading the ‘Trans-’ in Transatlantic Literature: On the ‘Female’ within *Three Negro Classics*”, Snorton provides a rereading of *Three Negro Classics* by Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and James Weldon Johnson to explicate how the Black slave mother is “rendered as the zone of nonbeing” (p. 106) and consequently reproduces sons who are illegible as “man” (p.105). Thus, the subjectification of the three men whose works constitute *Three Negro Classics* is dependent on their engagement with the female figure in their works, or what Hortense Spillers refers to as the “female within” (p.106).

In the final two chapters, Snorton discusses transgender lives more explicitly. The fourth chapter, “A Nightmarish Silhouette: Racialization and the Long Exposure of Transition”, looks at Christine Jorgensen, a white World War II veteran who became the first trans woman to receive mainstream media attention after undergoing sexual reassignment surgery in the 1950s. Jorgensen’s popularity stemmed from her ability to embody the ideals of white womanhood, such as femininity and respectability (p.141). Snorton presents what he calls the “countermythologies” (p.144) to this white normative tale of trans-formation with the stories of several black trans people who were denied media attention, including Lucy Hicks Anderson, Carlett Brown, and James McHarris/Annie Lee Grant. Snorton argues that Anderson, Brown, McHarris/Grant’s stories show how “blackness ... has come to structure modes of valuation through various forms, producing shadows that precede their constituting subjects/objects to give meaning to how gender is conceptualized, traversed, and lived” (p.175).

Perhaps the most exciting chapter for geographers of sexualities, as it adds to writings on queer rurality, is the concluding chapter, “DeVine’s Cut: Public Memory and the Politics of Martyrdom”, in which Snorton creates a biomythography of the life of Phillip DeVine, a young Black man who was murdered alongside Brandon Teena, a young white trans man in Humboldt, Nebraska on 31 December 1993. DeVine’s story was “cut” from the media accounts, documentary, poetry, and film on the life of Teena, who was made into a solo martyr by white

LGBT activists. “Biomythography” invokes Audre Lorde’s coining of the term in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), which relies on invention, fiction, and autobiography to fully capture Lorde’s liminal identity as a Black lesbian. Snorton regards biomythography as not only a genre of literature but also as “a praxis of invention that erupts as a question about (past and present) temporalities” (p.184) that will place DeVine’s story alongside Teena’s rather than as an afterthought. Relatedly, DeVine’s cut shows that “antitrans violence is also and always already an articulation of antiblackness” (p.185).

For those unfamiliar with conversations in Black, queer, or trans cultures, histories, and studies, reading *Black on Both Sides* may be quite arduous. For instance, it helps for the reader to approach the text with an understanding of who Christine Jorgensen and Brandon Teena were, as well as the media frenzy that surrounded the disclosure of their transition and murder, respectively. In other words, the reader must possess a basic understanding of trans history to appreciate how Snorton situates the lives of those were erased, such as Lucy Hicks Anderson or Phillip DeVine.

While *Black on Both Sides* is, overall, a terrific and surely an important text, Snorton’s own voice is often obscured. He thoughtfully and carefully, but perhaps too often draws upon numerous quotes from the scholars he engages with, even as this way of writing demonstrates the breadth of his research and his meticulous attention to detail. Further, the depth of Snorton’s conversation with so many other scholars also means that some of the concepts he relates can be confusing. For example, when clarifying Felix Guattari’s deployment of transversality as a form of unfixing temporality, Snorton writes: “For Guattari, as Troy Rhoades and Christoph Brunner explain, ‘[t]ransversality as a field of expression provides *milieu* for a creative emergence from disparate forces ... Transversality never links. It crafts, shifts, and relates’” (p.9). Rather than providing his own reading of Guattari, Snorton offers an interpretation from Rhoades and Brunner (2010) and assumes this is enough clarification for the reader. This can cause confusion in a book that has concepts with multiple and alternate meanings that are often being engaged simultaneously.

*Black on Both Sides* attends to a number of scales (from the flesh of the body to the sovereignty of the nation state), spaces (from the transportation of slaves across the Atlantic during the Middle Passage to the strategies used by slaves to escape bondage in the antebellum South), and temporalities (from the past to the present and how they intersect). However, Snorton does not develop his arguments in conversation with geographical thought and theory. Yet, at the same time, *Black on Both Sides* makes important contributions to geography. Snorton adds to the Black geographies literature by centering Black lives and how Black people exert agency to create spaces for themselves. His work also contributes to trans geographies by challenging gender binaries and complicating traditional ideas of transness with its grounding of Black ungendered flesh. As Snorton writes in the introduction: “To feel black in the diaspora, then, might be a trans experience” (p.8). Geographers would do well to build from these ideas.

## References

- Lorde A (1982) *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. New York: Crossing Press  
Rhoades T and Brunner C (2010) Transversal fields of experience. *Inflexions* 4:i-vii

*Sophonie Bazile*  
*Department of Geography*  
*University of Kentucky*  
*sba295@g.uky.edu*

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