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Review of "Spade, Normal Life"

Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law by Dean Spade

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# Review of Spade, *Normal Life*

Marcia Ochoa\*

Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. New York: South End Press, 2011.

THE CROWD GATHERED AT MODERN TIMES, A STALWART OF SAN FRANCISCAN LEFT, displaced from its storefront on Valencia Street, burst at its seams for the inaugural event of its new space. The event celebrated four new books on critical politics in transgender and queer social movements. Among them was Dean Spade's *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*.

With lots of progressive queer, trans, feminist, and abolitionist love in the house, Spade's message was crystal clear, as in his book: the individual rights-based framework of gay and lesbian politics is not a viable alternative for trans survival. Instead, we need to focus on the "distribution of life chances"—administrative regimes that value some lives over others. *Normal Life* helps us to focus our efforts on social transformation, not on the window-dressing of claims for state inclusion or protection. This is a book I can teach with and talk about with others who work to create a world where trans people can thrive.

When dealing with the U.S.-based transgender movement, the trick is always *which* trans people will count. After years of working at the movement's edges and developing my own work with transgender Latinas, I am heartened to see an analysis emerge that so clearly articulates a vision for coalitional work on the social issues that affect trans people. *Normal Life* links the struggles of U.S. trans people, privileged through other vectors of power, with the struggles of immigrants, people of color, disabled people, women, workers, and indigenous people. More important, it links the struggles of privileged trans people in the U.S. with those of other trans people who do not share those privileges. For example, Spade cites the Sylvia Rivera Law Project's (SLRP) work against the State of New York's REAL ID Act, which shared databases between the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) and the Social Security Administration. Shedding light on the impact of the increased surveillance of the post-September 11 U.S. security apparatus, when information did not match,

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the DMV suspended driver's licenses. This act targeted immigrants as it purported to enhance national security, but also caught up many transgender individuals whose gender identity on state documents did not match federal documents. SLRP used this shared interest to build coalitions and oppose the act.

Spade's analysis is grounded in his work at SLRP. From this vantage point, he draws upon Critical Race Theory, Queer Theory, Women of Color Feminisms, and Critical Disability Studies to chart a bold path for the future of trans politics. This path, unfortunately, is often discredited as "impossible" within a political imaginary that accumulates oppressions. But Spade's proposition makes it impossible to separate oppression into single-issue fights. He argues against an individual rights framework, and encourages scholars and activists to pay attention to "impact rather than intent," employing a distributive analysis that attends to disciplinary and biopolitical forms of power.

In this, Spade is staunchly Foucauldian. His discussion of the three modes of power in Chapter 3 employs Foucault in ways that are concrete and accessible. His definitions of disciplinary power and what he calls "population management power" follow Foucault closely, and are grounded in contemporary U.S. and trans politics and transgender issues. This way, he provides an eminently teachable text for courses on power in society, social movements, and community organizing—in the university, and outside. It is one of the clearest distinctions between disciplinary power and biopolitics I have encountered. Because he is able to link contemporary U.S. transgender politics to issues far and beyond the predominant imaginary of "transgender issues," Spade also provides an important entry point into discussions of social movement history, immigration, the prison-industrial complex, and antiracist organizing.

*Normal Life* shows how the lesbian and gay rights struggle for antidiscrimination laws, hate crimes statutes, and inclusion through institutions such as marriage and the military excludes a large number of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. The production of "perfect plaintiffs" for these single-issue fights, according to Spade, is not only exclusionary, it also feeds the very system that produces these inequities by maintaining the existing distribution of power. But his discussion of population management power could have been more grounded in concrete examples of resistance.

Spade provides important concrete examples of the "administrative violence" he mentions in the book's subtitle. His legal practice and research provide compelling evidence for the ways in which administrative systems produce "trans vulnerability": the administration of identity documents, sex-segregated facilities, and health care access. This book moves transgender politics out of its single-issue isolation, broadening its political base and making it more available for coalition-building projects. It proposes a trans politics that resists the "nonprofitization" of social movements in the neoliberal era, and charts some emergent examples of powerful coalition-building projects. With the book, as with the event at Modern

Times, I wonder about the voices and experiences of trans people most affected by incarceration, immigration policy, poverty, and disability. *Normal Life* will go a long way toward addressing this gap, but we will have to take Spade's proposals very seriously to build a movement centered on those most affected by administrative violence.