

C. Riley Snorton

*Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017 (978-1-5179-0172-1 (cloth))

*Reviewed by Marlon M. Bailey and Donny Bellamy, 2019*

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When readers open C. Riley Snorton's *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, they are introduced to the quotidian lives and the material conditions under which black trans people live historically and contemporaneously. In his preface, Snorton features black trans advocate Laverne Cox's expressions of collective grief in response to the brutal murder of Tamara Dominguez, the seventh transgender woman murdered in 2015 alone (viii). Snorton goes further by highlighting the promising life and premature death of Blake Brockington, the black trans man and Black Lives Matter activist who committed suicide, also in 2015. Snorton highlights the lived experiences of black trans people to frame and connect the aims of this book for readers. In an eloquent and poignant fashion, Snorton demonstrates that, although *Black on Both Sides* is an academic text, the conditions under which black trans people live are not merely academic. And, in the midst of the seemingly commonplace nature of black and trans death, Snorton is invested in finding "a vocabulary for" and a way to describe and reimagine black trans life (xiv). Most of all, Snorton brings readers to this interdisciplinary socio/historical investigation by emphasizing the complex multidimensionality of black trans subjectivities.

The crux of Snorton's book is a genealogical examination of the multiple intersections between blackness and transness through rigorous multifaceted archival research. In his account, Snorton invites readers to view transness as not simply an identity category of recent origins, but instead

as “a movement with no clear origin and no point of arrival” (2). Snorton, who is well situated within the canon of queer of color critique, illuminates how slavery and the production of racialized gender provided the foundations for an understanding of gender as mutable. He describes blackness as “an enveloping environment and condition of possibility” (2). Hence, blackness is not a standalone subordinate form of difference; instead, blackness and transness are mutually constitutive, mutable, and in “apposition” to one another (2). Snorton offers a cogent example of what it means to bring to bear intersectional and queer of color knowledges and analytics on blackness and transness as historical and contemporary categories of identity, experience, and life. He articulates how blackness and transness have both come into cultural circulation in ways that have deemed both as nonhuman. Specifically, 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? Furthermore, what insights can be gleaned from “a reading of ‘black’ and ‘trans’ that do not regard these as social markers that are manifestly transparent?” (7).

Snorton’s goal in addressing these questions is to illuminate “how the condensation of transness into the category of transgender is a racial narrative, as it also attends to how blackness finds articulation within transness” (8). Simply put, his articulation helps us understand that there are multiple intersections of blackness and transness. To fully understand the transitive nature of blackness and transness, Snorton thinks of transition in unconventional ways. He accomplishes this by building on Félix Guattari’s use of “transverality.” Guattari suggests that “transverality never links, it crafts, sifts, and relates” (9, quoting Troy Roades and Christoph Brunner). Snorton marries transitivity and transversality together to ultimately ask “what does it mean to have a body that has been made into a grammar for whole worlds of meaning?” (11).

In part I, “Blacken,” chapter 1, “Anatomically Speaking: Ungendered Flesh and the Science of Sex,” Snorton begins exploring “how flesh figures one’s route into the proverbial question of how matter matters” (11). It also introduces readers to Snorton’s important articulation of fungibility as something able to replace or be replaced by another identical item, mutually interchangeable. Snorton combines notions of the fungible with Hortense Spillers’s concept of “divided flesh” and the ways it is used to grammatically constitute value or the lack thereof. Spillers explains that divided flesh “produced an onto-epistemological framework premised on the fungibility of captive bodies, wherein their flesh functioned as disarticulation of human form from its anatomical features and their claims to humanity were controverted in favor of the production and perpetuation of cultural institutions” (19). Divided flesh explains how blackness precludes certain bodies from humanity. This mistreatment is embedded in the genealogies of blackness and transness (20). Snorton uses this formulation to explore how blackness operates in a way that reorganizes categories of sex and gender as human and nonhuman.

Snorton discusses the cases of J. Marion Sims, noting that policy and cultural discourse in the United States viewed black slaves as flesh, but refused to acknowledge white femininity as flesh that could also be examined. This discrepancy highlights the way race and gender are co-constituted, as Snorton writes that “captive flesh expressed an ungendered position that defines race as the *sine qua non* of sex. In this arrangement, gender socially constructs sex, and captive flesh becomes the material and metaphorical ground for unsettling a view of sex and gender as neatly divided according to each term’s relation to medico-scientific knowledge” (33).

Ultimately for Snorton, Sims's archive illuminates how black unnamed captives were viewed as material that would help make the field of gynecology but were also excluded from the category of woman under the logics of plantation slavery (53).

Snorton continues his discussion of fungibility in chapter 2, "Trans Capable: Fungibility, Fugitivity, and the Matter of Being." This chapter considers the ways that "gender indefiniteness would become a crucial modality of political and cultural maneuvering within figurations of blackness. This is best illustrated by the frequency with which narratives of fugitivity included cross-gendered modes of escape" (56). Snorton examines how slaves contorted gender and its possibilities to try to escape captivity, and what this reveals about present-day operations and the mutability of race and gender. Snorton notes, "Captive flesh figures a critical genealogy for modern transness, as chattel persons gave rise to an understanding of gender as mutable and as an amendable form of being" (57). This is one of the book's most rigorous aspects, as Snorton's discussion of fungibility illustrates how ungendered blackness provided the grounds for (trans) performances for freedom (58), or how modes of black being enabled new ways of ontologically understanding transness.

One story that Snorton explicates is that of William and Ellen Craft to highlight how fungibility and fugitivity are transitive. Ellen Craft could pass as white, dressed in masculine attire, and posed as the master of her husband, who had much darker skin tone. Because she could pass for white and male-bodied, Ellen knew she would be asked to write her name, but she was illiterate. She tied her hand up and pretended it was "lame" to rebuff requests for her signature. Snorton notes that Ellen was forced to dress as a man to preserve the homosocial/heterosocial norms of the times (76). Eventually, the Crafts obtained their freedom and relocated to England, where they worked as abolitionists. Their journey to freedom highlights "how the ungendering of blackness became a site of fugitive maneuvers wherein the dichotomized and collapsed designations of male-man-masculine and female-woman-feminine remained open--that is fungible" (59). Gender becomes a fungible matter because of blackness--which is viewed as easily used for one purpose or another--making it "a condition of possibility" (59). This exploration reflects Snorton's overarching argument of how the fungible nature of blackness allows for new modes of being for both blackness and transness.

In part II, "Transit," in chapter 3, Snorton examines trans/gender implications for racial blackness in canonical texts of twentieth-century Afromodernist literatures through close readings of Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*, W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, by James Weldon Johnson. In this chapter, Snorton brilliantly uses these canonical texts by African American men to offer a fecund theory of black gender and transness. Snorton draws from black feminist theorists like Hortense Spillers and others to suggest that for these much-discussed black authors, the black mother is the metonym for black sociality. The trans in transatlantic not only represents time, space, and place, but also the movement across registers of being, between beings and nonbeings, and between different kinds of blackness. Thus, black women's gender is fungible in that it is able to reproduce beings and objects, and it stands in for black sociality in these canonical Afromodernist texts. Under slavery, the slave masters and the white ruling class established a system in which the status of personhood was always tied to the mother, not the father, to ensure perpetual subjugation and unfreedom of black people. For instance, in *The Souls of Black Folks*,

Du Bois observes the intersection of race and gender because it tied black men's freedom to black women's freedom (103-04). Thus, for Snorton, one could rearticulate the Du Boisean *problem of the color line* in terms of reproduction, "such that one substitutes the question of what it feels to be a problem with what it means to have a black mother" (104). Ultimately, Snorton lays out the ways that black women's gender is fungible and how that fungibility provided black masculine authors the ability to reconceptualize blackness as human and modern. This analysis has profound implications for current conditions of black social death.

In Part III, "Blackout," in chapter 4, Snorton deploys queer of color analysis to examine the function of race, particularly blackness, as a tool to help establish Christine Jorgensen, a white transwoman, and other white gender variants, as celebrities and as the exceptional and (exemplary) trans embodiment in the US, domestically and globally. Drawing from Emily Skidmore's impactful work on Jorgensen, Snorton argues that blackness and transness helped to enable Jorgensen's ascendance to celebrity discursively, due in part to how the increased invisibility of nonwhiteness provided subjectivities to which to be compared. For Snorton, both historically and contemporaneously, blackness makes possible different ways of being trans, in the midst of how, according to Viviane Namaste, gender often becomes a means through which to "displace the material and symbolic conditions of race and class" (143).

This chapter explores the racial order of things that gave rise to the first transsexual celebrity and how black trans figures mediated life in the wake of Jorgensen's fame. Specifically, Snorton shows how the media coverage of figures such as Carlett Brown and Ava Betty Brown was used by the black media to discuss intramural concerns related to gender, sexuality, and personhood (143). Carlett Brown, featured in *Jet* magazine, utilized Jorgensen's model to try to obtain surgery, stating that her condition was due "to a previously diagnosed intersex condition" (158). However, unlike Jorgensen, Carlett was told she would need to relinquish her US citizenship in order to receive the surgery. After giving up her citizenship, Carlett was arrested for dressing in femme clothing in public and struggled to raise her bail money. Similar interactions with the law and government resulted in Carlett remaining in the US stateless and without surgery. During and after these setbacks, Carlett advocated to *Jet* for the liberation of "female impersonators" as a constitutional right. Brown's advocacy highlights how the definition of transsexuality can vacillate between "the contradictions of power" (160-61). Carlett's blackness, and the harassment by the police that came with it, altered her lived reality in ways that would have been unfamiliar to Jorgensen.

Similarly, Ava Betty Brown was featured in the black press and labeled "Double-Sexed Defendant" after being arrested for wearing women's clothing. When questioned, Brown explained that friends knew her only as, and all of her legal possessions were under the name, "Betty Brown." For Snorton, it is Ava Betty Brown's declaration, "if I am a man, I don't know it" (162) that disrupted contemporaneous medical and legal definitions of transsexuality. Brown's statement "suggests a different, and perhaps decolonial, understanding of the body she inhabited" (162). Brown's statements reinforced her agency to declare her gender regardless of medical surgeries or legal recognition. Although their stories depicted them as black versions of Christine Jorgensen, figures such as Carlett Brown and Ava Betty Brown highlight how transitivity interrupts and creatively reconstitutes different ways of being trans.

In chapter 5, “DeVine’s Cut: Public Memory and the Politics of Martyrdom,” Snorton examines the Brandon Teena archive and queries what sacrifices are made and what exclusions are required to make LGBT stories legible for mass consumption. Snorton asks further, in what ways does blackness appear and disappear in the service of white silhouettes of LGBT historiography? To this end, Snorton examines many of the most heralded moments in LGBT history, events that the fields of gay and lesbian, transgender, and queer studies mark as the movement’s beginnings. For instance, the Compton Cafeteria riot and the Stonewall Rebellion were both led by black and brown trans people, who are largely excluded from the historical narratives. Their exclusion constitutes but two examples of how LGBT histories, from which the fields of queer and transgender studies draw, participate in constructing the LGBT subjectivities and communities as white.

Snorton spends the crux of this chapter interrogating the “Brandon Teena archive,” which, drawing from J. Jack Halberstam, Snorton describes as the repository of materials that bring together “a resource, a productive narrative, a set of representations, a history, a memorial, and a time capsule” (177). Snorton focuses on how the full-length feature film, *Boys Don’t Cry*, directed by Kimberly Peirce, exemplifies Black erasure, literally, to construct Brandon Teena “as a kind of secular martyr,” one that makes Teena legible and sympathetic for mass consumption. *Boys Don’t Cry* totally erases Phillip DeVine, a Black male amputee, who was one of the others murdered by John Lotter and Marvin Nissen at the same time as Teena (178).

In order to explore and redress DeVine’s life narrative, Snorton constructs what Audre Lorde calls a “biomythography,” a mixture of truth and invention of DeVine’s life in order to redress the erasure of Blackness from the trans story and to challenge the notion of total incommensurability of Blackness and transness. Snorton also critiques how our society, especially in our dominant discourse of historical violence done to bodies, somehow has difficulty acknowledging or coming to terms with the convergence of race, gender, and sexual dis/abilities and terror. This chapter helps illuminate ways to view and challenge antitrans violence as always already antiblack violence.

Ultimately, this work is significant to the genealogy of transgender studies, a field that has yet to fully conceptualize and interrogate the role of blackness in both historical and present-day articulations and understandings of trans\* identities, subjectivities, and communities. *Black on Both Sides* also offers useful theories and analytics of race and gender, locating their intersectional articulations of subjugation and oppression both then and now. Snorton challenges understandings of transness and blackness that may leave readers feeling uncomfortable, but this discomfort is necessary for the field to progress. One of Snorton’s most significant contributions here is to remind us of the importance of maintaining a skeptical and recalcitrant attitude toward dominant notions of being and becoming. His interrogation not only requires readers to contravene “commonsense notions of the body” (136), but it also invites scholars to rethink how we understand accessibility. Finally, although this book is written primarily for an academic audience, given the various topics, literatures, theories, and bodies of knowledge Snorton engages, this book is important and relevant for everyone in the academic arena and beyond.