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Stryker *Transgender History* Book Review

I often joke to my parents that this whole “attending University” thing is an elaborate ruse for them to buy me expensive texts and books I would struggle to justify buying and marking up with notes on my own. Considering my personal academic interests in both LGBTQ theory and history, I was absolutely elated when I discovered that Susan Stryker’s groundbreaking text *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution* was a required book for my classes this quarter. Stryker’s book is a lovely and accessible introduction to Western transgender history, told in a deceptively non-linear way that hooks the reader into past and present political struggles of the trans/GNC community, and clearly avoids doling out any easy answers.

The very first page mentions that it is “primarily a history of the transgender movement in the United States, concentrating mostly on the years after World War II,”¹ but after the first chapter almost entirely of glossary there is in fact a good thirty-four pages covering the broad strokes of gender-non-conforming development in the U.S. and parts of Western Europe from the 1850s through the late 1950s. This time period of 19th century through roughly mid-20th century American social deviance is my own field of historical interest, and Stryker does a bang-up job not only summarizing the broad swathe of trans developments in these hundred or so years, but even weaves in deft commentary about trans medicalization & pathologization linked with

¹ Susan Stryker. *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*. (Berkeley, CA; Seal Press, 2017). p. 1.

misogyny and race² that deeply informs later developments in the 20th century. It is clear from the sources and specific, named accounts that Stryker pulls that she has spent much time in the archive dedicated to the study and preservation of first-hand transgender accounts in whatever form they may take for the edification of trans/GNC individuals in the present day.

I was also struck by how remarkably accessible and easy-to-read this book was. Clocking in at a cool two-hundred and thirty-six pages before acknowledgments and sources, Stryker has a breezy writing style with tantalizing hints of personalization and a well-crafted narrative that honestly makes the book difficult to put down. Much like other work of hers that combines history, performance, and theory such as her “My Words to Victor Frankenstein” piece,³ this style of writing that is as personally gripping as it is academic is absolutely delightful to me. Many non-fiction books about history and especially about anything related to LGBTQ studies or queer theory often suffer from tiny typesetting and bone-dry writing; not so here. Stryker also visually and topically spices up her formatting with a page or two every so often devoted to a graph of historical data or included context in a sidebar about related people and stories that isn’t covered within the main text.

The book does have its downsides, however. I do take criticism with the third-person, textbook-esque writing style of this book, as if to create a dominant cultural narrative of capital-T capital-H Transgender History within the U.S., despite how ephemeral and easily lost many transgender and gender-non-conforming narratives of the last 200 years or so have proved themselves to be, especially for BIPOC and disabled trans folks. The title itself is even somewhat misleading, seeing as Stryker’s own self-described goal is that of a basic overview of only U.S. and Western European transgender history, even though countries such as Pakistan have rich

² Susan Stryker. *Transgender History*. pp. 52-53.

³ Susan Stryker. “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix,” in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia, PA; Gordon and Breach Science Publishers SA, 1994).

“centuries-old systems of social organization”⁴ of gender non-normativity and multiple other South Asian countries have had legalized third genders since the mid 00s,⁵ something the supposedly exceptional U.S. cannot claim nearly fifteen years later. Yet at the same time that she uses this tried-and-true colonialist historical format, Stryker does not offer up an easy narrative of social “progress” within her examination of 20th and 21st century transgender movements, instead tracing paths through individual decades in a non-linear fashion in order to show the evolution of opinions, rights, and politics, for better or for worse. Stryker acknowledges that the history is still being written, and still has the potential to turn out right, or to turn out horribly wrong, for American trans populations.

Despite my own hangups about the book’s comfort zone of White historical storytelling and how I wish Stryker had attempted further to decolonize her methodology, I do think that *Transgender History* is overall an excellently written and shockingly accessible read for the everyday queer or casual historian. It is an extensively researched introduction to some subtle conceptions of trans studies, and a beautiful start to what is hopefully a brighter, wider future of transgender historical pursuits.

⁴ Faris Kahn. “Khwaja Sira: ‘Transgender’ Activism and Transnationality in Pakistan,” in *South Asia in the World: An Introduction*, ed. Susan S. Wadley (England, UK; Routledge, 2014). p. 174.

⁵ Faris Kahn. “Khwaja Sira.” p. 172.