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Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism, and Feminism. [Review]

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Recommended Citation

McGough, Sarah M. Book Review "Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism, and Feminism." by Shannon Sullivan. *Thirdspace* 3, no. 1 (2003)

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thirdspace

a journal of feminist theory & culture

thirdspace: a journal of feminist theory & culture, volume 3 issue 1 (November 2003)

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reviews

Shannon Sullivan, *Living across and through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism and Feminism*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001. 204 pp.

Philosopher Shannon Sullivan presents an intriguing synthesis of some areas of scholarship that many have previously seen as incompatible, namely, pragmatism, phenomenology, critical race theory, and feminism. Most notably, Sullivan puts continental concerns into interaction with pragmatic basics including John Dewey's understanding of bodies as transactional. Sullivan's work seems to be most valuable for awakening some feminists, especially poststructuralists and standpoint theorists, to the advantages of using pragmatism as a framework for understanding truth, reality, social growth, and experience.

For Sullivan, as for Dewey, transaction designates “the dynamic, co-constitutive relationship of organisms and their environments” whereby each element both forms and is formed by the other (Sullivan 1). The mutual transformation entailed in this relationship erases sharp distinctions between the organism and the world, hence calling into question the role of skins. Given the leading role of skins in her title, I was disappointed that she only references skins during her exploration of transaction, rather than overtly confronting some of feminism's skin-related questions. Also frustratingly, the racialized term ‘skins’ is never troubled, perhaps to the particular dismay of Native Americans still haunted by this word and its chromatically-enhanced cousin.

Central to the idea of transaction is an understanding of bodies as patterned activities that take on varying meanings in different contexts. As an activity, Sullivan proposes that ‘body’ is better understood as ‘bodying,’ which is never divorced from mind, thereby dispelling mind/body dualism and related problems of substance metaphysics. This noteworthy suggestion provides a new direction of focus, namely on the actual doings of bodies, considering real-life somatic experiences, and the ways in which they can be improved. The habits that compose and style ‘bodying’ are the organization and meaning of one's bodily impulses, which are formed through one's transaction with the world. Rather than mere repetition or the donning of masquerade, habits are complex ways of mentally and physically behaving which “effortlessly” constitute one's identity (Sullivan 93). While for most people ‘habit’ can connote a stagnant trait, Sullivan counter-intuitively describes habits *as* will and capable of change. Lacking in Sullivan's account of habits, their formation and their capacity for change, is input

from anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists, who are trained to identify and analyze the ways in which people style themselves, and, perhaps more importantly for a pragmatic account, the outcomes of their habits.

Sullivan puts her understanding of bodies as transactional to work, using it in the context of the poststructuralist/phenomenological debate over the possibility of pre- or non-discursive bodies. Most vital to unpacking Sullivan's contribution is her proposal to understand discourse in terms of transaction. The debate over the existence of pre- or non-discursive bodies, is then more productively dissolved into attending to the influence of discourse on bodies in the here and now. In this regard, Sullivan supports Judith Butler's call to stop dwelling on questions about the nondiscursivity of bodies, but pushes Butler to go farther in considering the particular ways in which bodies are currently constituted by discourse through looking at lived experience.

Sullivan uses habit in conjunction with Butler's 'performativity' to rescue Butler from some of her critics. For Sullivan, habit is the stylized ordering of impulses that predispose an organism to act in certain ways, while for Butler, performativity is a repetition, the activity which styles and constitutes a person. For Butler, the constraining, patterned habits of gender can be productive, a possibility that Sullivan attempts to clarify by employing Dewey's understanding of habit and transaction. Sullivan's commentary on Butler is unique in that instead of talking about what is there, she talks about what is not, supplementing Butler's performativity with habit in order to make it more robust.

The final chapter uses transaction and Deweyan pragmatism to improve Sandra Harding's feminist standpoint theory. Sullivan rightly contends that Harding problematically adheres to a foundational account of truth as mirroring, despite her efforts to open it up to a plurality of perspectives, particularly – and starting from – those of the oppressed. Nonetheless, Sullivan supports the pluralist aspects of Harding's theory, but warns that some of the strengths of pluralism are lost when Harding describes "background-revealing" elements of her standpoint theory. Sullivan also zeroes in on faults in Harding's depiction of objectivity as "less partial and distorted," though fails to discuss sufficiently Harding's understanding of the view of ruling life as perverse insofar as it "systematically reverses the proper order of things: it substitutes abstract for concrete reality" (Harding 124). Examining this point would buttress and yet complicate her later claim that Harding may be replacing men with women in a hierarchy of privileged insight. Sullivan wants to use transaction so that knowledge is no longer a passive recording, but a way of ordering experience so that change can be effected. In this way, Sullivan links knowledge to satisfaction, and thereby epistemology to good living.

In her concluding remarks, Sullivan turns to critical race theory. She suggests understanding race and other identity categories in terms of transaction, rather than as "additive analysis" (Spelman 114). Throughout our transactions with the environment, Sullivan says that distinctiveness, and therefore race, is preserved because transaction works across a plane of connection and continuity. For Sullivan, because whiteness is a way of bodying, it will linger even though one strives to be antiracist. Beyond its simple fact of lingering, Sullivan issues a contestable claim that preserving whiteness can be worthwhile because it maintains a history that can be used consciously to improve race relations.

Much in the same way that she argues for a plurality of perspectives informing one another in her version of standpoint theory, Sullivan demonstrates a bringing together of a diverse, and at times seemingly contradictory, array of perspectives, shifting amongst them to fashion a view of the world and of good living that is itself flexible, fallible, and future-oriented.

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