

*Representing trans: Linguistic, legal and everyday perspectives*

Edited by Evan Hazenberg and Miriam Meyerhoff. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2017.

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*Representing trans* is not only an apt descriptor for the themes explored in this book. It also speaks to the work performed by the book as a whole: it joins a body of new scholarship giving voice to trans lives and experience, at a time when the question of the gender binary seems to have become an acute focus in popular culture and even a determining factor in politics globally. As the editors say in their introduction, “*trans* is undeniably ... hot news and it is hot stuff” (11). The subtitle is an accurate description of its overall focus on linguistic, legal and everyday concerns yet the book convincingly argues how such concerns, cannot be disentangled from the material.

Eleven contributions are grouped into four categories: Representation, Legal Representation, Self-representations, and Linguistic Representations. The editors have done an excellent job sequencing these for maximum accessibility for both experts and novices in the field. The opening chapter by Karen Parker, “Beyond Fuckology”, offers a historical-linguistic primer on English-language terminology which equips the reader with solid foundational knowledge. This becomes crucial for later chapters addressing the immense material power of words in transgender lives, from the implicit assumptions of “ordinary language” concepts like “true sex” (Christopher Hutton) and the very intelligibility of trans existence before the law to the jarring notion that anatomy – not consent – is the legislative determinant of whether one has been raped (Elizabeth McDonald, Jack Byrne and Sandra Dickson). A later chapter by Lal Zimman uses a workplace analysis of neoliberalism to argue for a more collectively attuned understanding of identity construction.

Initiated from Aotearoa New Zealand, this internationally collaborative volume is well placed in consideration of linguistic and cultural translations, and several chapters serve to de-centre or provincialise Western and anglophone conceptual norms. Poiva Junior Aschleigh Feu’u’s comparative study of the *fa’afafine* of Samoa and the *whakawahine* of Aotearoa New Zealand is a compelling example of this: Feu’u deftly analyses the ways that the contrasting reputations and experiences of these labels have been shaped by the historical conditions of colonisation and Western epistemologies.

The diversity of self-representation with respect to gender is illustrated by the interviewees quoted in several of the chapters. Patterns can be discerned on the basis of age or generation, geographical location, linguistic framework, national context, cultural milieu and gender, yet the interlocutors expressed widely varied opinions and thoughts on the body, emotion and the medical establishment. Rejection or belief in a gender binary is in no way unanimous, and the interviewees’ nuanced reasoning behind their position defies universal assumptions one way or the other. Kimberly Tao’s chapter on trans agency and self-representation in Hong Kong reveals how interviewees had very different takes on the meaning of terms (in Cantonese) like “sex change” and “sex restoration”, and even “transgender” and “transsexual”.

Interaction with the medical establishment is one of the key ‘everyday’ themes of the book. However, a key strength by all contributors is their effectiveness in demonstrating how health considerations transcend the body. This is done matter of factly, without chastising the tendency in more mainstream, scholarly discourse to fetishise questions of body and trauma.

This indicates immense scholarly and political generosity. In their chapter on informed consent in trans healthcare, Ahi Wi-Hongi, Adeline Greig and Evan Hazenberg are not necessarily stating the obvious when they remind us that there are “qualitative and quantitative differences between experiences of dysphoria among trans people and general bodily dissatisfaction among cis people” (153).

One of the most compelling critical explorations in the book concerns the metaphor of the “journey”. In a sensitive discussion of trans self-labelling, Hazenberg cautions that it is by no means universally accepted – for some of the interviewees gender is *not* a “transition” or process of becoming, it simply *is*. At the risk of re-inscribing the cliché, this critical unpacking describes much of the book: it explores identity shifts, historical transformations, linguistic modifications and revolutions, and legal change. Readers are taken on geographical and temporal journeys, but also on more internal, personal and ontological ones. Readers can also choose-their-own-adventure, combining various chapters and finding their own themes. For example, Tao explores the extent to which different understandings between transmen and transwomen of categorical versus dimensional gender may be shaped by differentiated social expectations regarding their visibility or invisibility, in which surgery can also play an important role. Transwomen face unique pressures in this respect, while another chapter by Hazenberg charts how between the 1950s and 1990s, particularly butch and masculine women and transmen were largely “invisible”, not in a positive way. This chapter draws attention to a lack of historical knowledge about trans and gender diverse experiences and calls for the work of historians in this field to receive greater institutional support.

The stand-out chapter on visibility is the illustrated biographical essay by photographer Fiona Clark (compiled by Miriam Meyerhoff), from which the book’s cover image is taken. Shot in June 1975 at the Miss New Zealand Drag Queen Ball in Auckland, its two subjects Perry and Diana direct their iron gaze into the lens with arresting frankness. Clark reflects on how people often feel confronted by such photographs: “The people in them are dignified and they are just as comfortable looking at you as you are looking at them. [They] are deeply human – they’re complete and they’re themselves and that’s who you’re looking at. This is how they choose to present themselves to you”.

This speaks to the book’s function as a presentation of some of the sophisticated and nuanced, yet generous and accessible work being done in trans scholarship. In the epilogue chapter, Niko Besnier opens with the statement: “Representing is a political act”. This book acts politically.