

Transgender Theory and Embodiment: the risk of racial marginalisation

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ABSTRACT *Queer theories have received criticism for their ethnocentrism and their lack of careful attention to the lived realities of transsexual and transgendered people. A forum is being established through the publication of transgender theorists' work, where transgender theorists may rework 'queer', but how well does this reworking address concerns about ethnocentrism? For some 'transpeople' it is important to maintain traditional cultural values by resisting identification with (contemporary western) medical discourses on transsexuality. How might queer and transgender theorising inform and be informed by the discursive pathways being carved out by people for whom medicalised understandings of gender may be deemed culturally inappropriate? I illustrate the points made in this paper by drawing from interviews with gender liminal people who live in New Zealand and who belong to cultures indigenous to the South Pacific. Whilst wholeheartedly supporting the efforts of transgenderists to challenge medical constructions of transsexuality, one of the purposes of this paper is to critique the way perspectives of whiteness echo, largely unacknowledged, through transgender theorising and to thus inspire more critical thinking about the racialised aspects of transsexual bodies and transgendered ways of being.*

Introduction

Queer theories have been variously criticised for their ethnocentrism (Hennessy, 1995; Goldman, 1996; Lee, 1996; Walters, 1996) and their lack of careful attention to the lived realities of transsexual and transgendered people (Namaste, 1996). In the course of this decade, a forum is being established through the publication of transgender theorists' work, where transgender theorists may rework 'queer'. But, how well does this reworking address concerns about ethnocentric theorising? Where are people of racial 'minorities' situated in queer and transgender theories? Despite the claims of inclusiveness of both transgender and queer writings, do perspectives of whiteness continue to resonate, largely unacknowledged, through transgender and queer theorising?

In this paper, I present a critique of the medicalisation of transsexuality which foregrounds cultural identity rather than gender identity. In doing this, I challenge concepts of queer and transgender, usually revered for their all-inclusiveness, as to how well they work cross-culturally. I illustrate the points made in this paper by drawing from

interviews with gender liminal people (that is, people who live between genders, live as a third gender, or are undergoing a transgenering process) who live in New Zealand and who belong to cultures indigenous to the South Pacific. Although I am basing my argument on details that apply to this specific geo-political context, the implications of this challenge to ethnocentrism in queer and transgender theorising extend well beyond the South Pacific.

Through this paper, I pose questions about the role of queer and transgender theories in providing discursive alternatives to western medical constructions of transsexuality. Because of the complex language that is required to discuss the intersections of these topics discussed here I ask you, the reader, to allow me some flexibility in my uses of the terms queer, trans, transpeople, transgender, and gender liminal.

I am reluctant to subsume Maaori [1] (indigenous New Zealand) transpeople within the same terminology as Pakeha [2] (white New Zealand) transpeople, especially in cases where there is obviously a desire to foreground Maaori political and cultural identities over (trans)gender identities, and where pursuing those Maaori political goals includes developing a critique of Pakeha conceptions of the relationship between sexed bodies and lived gender. Because I am loathe to simply refer to these Maaori people as transgendered, I employ the term used by some anthropologists working in this area: gender liminal (see Besnier, 1994, p. 287, for further explanation of this decision about terminology).

Throughout this paper, I tend to refer to 'race' rather than 'ethnicity'. The factors influencing this decision are discussed in Alice's (1991) article: *Whose Interests? Decolonising 'Race' and 'Ethnicity'*. Alice argues that while the term ethnicity:

allows diversity, it ... ignores the demands of indigenous peoples to recognise their *decolonised identities*. The problem is that 'ethnicity' denies the preference of some indigenous peoples to use a language of 'race' which legitimates their first-nation status, a status quite different from other 'ethnic' minorities. (p. 65)

It therefore seems more appropriate to write of 'race' rather than 'ethnicity' for a paper which challenges transgender and queer theorising to address questions of race, indigeneity, and colonisation. Despite this justification, I acknowledge problems with the term 'race' in that it, arguably, refers to a category which is entirely mutable and unidentifiable. This paper works from the understanding that it is necessary to work with (while critiquing) such problematic categories as 'race' and 'gender'.

Anthropological research documents numerous examples of non-western cultures where concepts of gender liminality are accommodated through available gender roles (e.g., Roscoe, 1987, 1991; Nanda, 1990; Besnier, 1994). The relationship between this aspect of anthropological study and research on transsexuality and transgenderism has complex implications for the various parties involved. On the one hand, a romanticised version of third-gender acceptance within non-western cultures can provide images of hope for transgendered people fighting gender oppression. Besnier (1994), critical of such romanticising of Polynesian acceptance of gender liminality, comments on the risk of assuming that gender-phobic attitudes are purely colonial phenomena. He writes: 'explaining violence against liminal individuals as the sole result of emergent modernity in the Pacific Islands presupposes a romanticized view of Polynesia that has no validity outside the western imagination' (p. 560, note 47).

On the other hand, through the processes of westernisation (via colonisation), it is now not uncommon for gender liminal persons to seek sex reassignment surgery even though they live within a cultural context where their gender liminality might formerly have

been understood in terms of a gender role for which bodily change was not considered an issue. For some gender liminal people, however, it is important to maintain 'traditional' cultural values by resisting identification with (contemporary western) medical discourses on transsexuality. For other gender liminal people, particularly in contexts where little detailed historical information about sexuality and gender remains decades after colonisers' attempts at assimilation and annihilation, it is not simply a case of reclaiming cultural values around gender liminality, but of creating gendered ways of being that satisfy aspects of both racial and (trans)gendered politics.

Transgender Theorising

Stryker (1994) outlines two strands of meaning associated with 'transgender'. The first, which she describes as the original meaning, refers to people who cross genders without seeking sex reassignment surgery. The second depicts transgender as a far more diverse and expansive umbrella term 'that refers to all identities or practices that cross over, cut across, move between or otherwise queer socially constructed sex/gender boundaries' (p. 251, note 2). Stryker claims some cultural diversity for transgender in explaining that it 'includes, but is not limited to, transsexuality, heterosexual transvestism, gay drag, butch lesbianism, and such non-European identities as the Native American berdache or the Indian Hijra' (p. 251, note 2). In the same essay, Stryker situates transsexuality as a 'culturally and historically specific transgender practice/identity through which a transgendered subject enters into a relationship with medical, psychotherapeutic, and juridical institutions in order to gain access to certain hormonal and surgical technologies for enacting and embodying itself. (pp. 251–252, note 2). In this paper, my working definition of 'transsexual' is similar to Stryker's, but I question how well 'transgender' might operate as the expansive and culturally diverse term Stryker describes.

Some transgender writings (e.g., Stone, 1991; Stryker, 1994; Prosser, 1998) offer inspiring readings of and challenges to medical constructions of transsexuality that prescribe possible modes of sexual embodiment, and that collaborate with legal institutions to selectively endorse certain gendered ways of being. These concerns about the medicalisation of transsexuality are held not only by transgenderists for whom gender may be highlighted relative to questions of racial politics. Some transpeople also seek to challenge medical approaches to transsexuality on the basis that these approaches represent a violation of cultural values and beliefs about the relationship between sexed embodiment and lived gender. Here, I will draw from three specific transgender texts and pose questions which resonate through the following discussion of the medicalisation of gender liminality among indigenous peoples of the South Pacific.

Sandy Stone's *Posttranssexual Manifesto* presents the possibility of subverting dominant discourses on gender which medical science endorses. Rather than being complicit in the discourses of 'the traditional gender frame', Stone argues that it is preferable to 'seize upon the textual violence inscribed in the transsexual body and turn it into a reconstructive force' (Stone, 1991, p. 295). She proposes that transsexuals who live to pass (and pass to live) be 'recruited' from their lives of invisibility where they strive to maintain 'plausible histories' to effect the growth of 'the genre of visible transsexuals' (p. 296). It is the deconstruction of the man/woman binary and the possibility of identifying visibly as transsexual, that Stone describes as posttranssexuality. For Stone, posttranssexuality provides a means of expanding the bounds of culturally intelligible gender.

Judith Halberstam, in *F2M: The Making of Female Masculinity*, poses a transgendered challenge to the concept of gender, describing gender as a fiction and a postmodern

mixing and matching of body parts. In her writing about gender as a fiction, Halberstam breaks down the notion that there is any ‘crossing’ to be done in moving between/among genders. According to Halberstam, there are a number of ways in which we all—transsexual or otherwise—live this fiction. She writes: ‘masculinity or femininity *may* be simulated by surgery, but they can also find other fictional forms like clothing or fantasy. Surgery is only one of many possibilities for remaking the gendered body’ (Halberstam, 1994, p. 225). Halberstam defines her concept of ‘gender fictions’ as ‘fictions of a body taking its own shape, a cut-up genre that mixes and matches body parts, sexual acts, and postmodern articulations of the impossibility of identity’ (1994, p. 210).

It is through this notion of gender as a fiction, that Halberstam develops her argument about the concept of ‘trans’, and attempts to break down the barriers which put the ‘trans’ in ‘transsexual’. Reflecting on Stone’s *Posttranssexual Manifesto*, Halberstam writes: ‘The *post* in posttranssexual demands ... that we examine the strangeness of all gendered bodies, not only the transsexualized ones and that we rewrite the cultural fiction that divides a sex from a transsex, a gender from a transgender’ (Halberstam, 1994, p. 226).

Susan Stryker takes up aspects of Stone’s call for transsexual visibility, and Halberstam’s claim about the ‘strangeness of all gendered bodies’, in her writing on transgender rage. Through the particularly emotive expression of her transgender rage that takes the form of an article published in 1994, Stryker performs a crafty reclaiming of monstrosity—a subversive identification with Frankenstein’s monster—writing: ‘As we rise up from the operating tables of our rebirth, we transsexuals are something more, and something other, than the creatures our makers intended us to be’ (p. 242). Stryker is specifically concerned with the relationship between the motivations of medical science and transsexual agency, and uses the reclaiming of monstrosity as a means of affirming that it is possible to invest in medical processes of transsexing without being complicit in the maintenance of the gender binary. She also acknowledges the oppressive effects of medical science that ‘seeks to contain and colonise the radical threat posed by a particular transgender strategy of resistance to the coerciveness of gender: physical alteration of the genitals’ (p. 244). Stryker argues that despite the conservative and normalizing motivations of medical science, there is no guarantee of ‘the compliance of subjects thus embodied with the agenda that resulted in a transsexual means of embodiment’ (p. 242).

Stryker’s expression of transgender rage, with its specifically corporeal features, comes to a crescendo when she writes:

Rage colors me as it presses in through the pores of my skin, soaking in until it becomes the blood that courses through my beating heart. It is a rage bred by the necessity of existing in external circumstances that work against my survival. (p. 244)

That she is coloured by rage is explicit. How she is coloured by race is not.

‘Transgender’ Voices?

How might queer and transgender politics and theories work (or not work) for people whose primary political affiliation is with their racial or cultural identity group? In order to explore this question, I will draw on interviews with fa’afafine [3] (Samoan males who live as a ‘third gender’) and transsexuals conducted in New Zealand in 1996 as part of my doctoral research. Although the interviews were not focused primarily on questions of cultural identity or politics, I did seek research participants from a diverse range of

cultural backgrounds, and some of these people talked about their politics and identities in ways which have prompted and informed the current discussion. The three interviewees whose voices will be heard here are: Don, a 45-year-old Samoan fa'afafine; Pat, a 32-year-old pre-operative female-to-male Maaori man; and Tania, a 36-year-old pre-operative male-to-female Maaori transsexual. (All names are pseudonyms chosen by the interviewer or the interviewee at the time of the interview. References to research participants as a 'man', a 'fa'afafine', and a 'transsexual' draw from those interviewees' own ways of describing themselves.)

Don provides an example of reclaiming a traditional sexuality/gender subject position which is very distinct from, but in some respects resembles, transgenderism. He talks about the importance of fa'afafine in Samoan culture, and how his own sense of self-esteem relates to being fa'afafine. To begin with, he describes the relationship between his Samoan and fa'afafine identities by saying: 'for me culture is always first and then sexuality', and 'any interaction I have with anybody, the two things I want them to find out about me is the fact that I'm Samoan first and foremost and ... [secondly] that I'm fa'afafine'. In stating his priorities thus, Don sets himself in sharp relief to queer and transgender stances which often highlight gender and sexuality to the point of obscuring race altogether. Elaborating on this contrast Don describes how, to him, fa'afafine simply 'means like a woman', whereas:

All the Palagi [4] [English] terms: gay, faggot, queer ... [they're] awful ... [Those terms] actually tell you how that society views that person. My culture just views it 'like a woman'. And it's like a special woman. It's a knowledgeable woman but recognised [as] ... anatomically male. (Don, interviewed: May, 1996)

He describes being taught from an early age that to be fa'afafine was to be valued and respected, despite shifting to New Zealand as a child and having to learn that fa'afafine were far less tolerated there.

I was never put down or anything ... I grew up with this really arrogant opinion of myself: for some reason the world is rather special with me in it! Being fa'afafine was really special. Jesus, when I came to New Zealand that was soon cut out! ... I remember my mother saying: 'You mustn't walk like that, Don'; I said: 'Why not?' [and she replied:] 'Well, they don't do that in New Zealand'. ... That's something I never ever accepted. (Don, interviewed: May, 1996)

For Don, cultural identity precedes gender/sexuality identity in political importance, but the two are intrinsically linked: one does not make sense without the other.

Although he plays an active role in his local gaylesbitrans support networks, he is highly sceptical about the Palagi system of dividing and labeling sexualities and genders, preferring to espouse a more holistic approach. He is also critical of Palagi attempts to reclaim words such as queer, suggesting that this only reflects Palagi cultures' intolerant attitudes towards sexuality and gender variance. Don points out that the division-by-labels of sexuality and gender categories makes it hard to talk about concepts of fa'afafine and holism, for the language assumes categories which obscure the importance of the inclusivity of fa'afafine.

For Don, being fa'afafine does not imply dissatisfaction with sexed embodiment nor does it make specifications about partner-gender: fa'afafine is constructed across sexuality and gender. However, he echoes his elders in expressing concern about younger fa'afafine being attracted by the glamour and lifestyle of cities where they come to think

of themselves more in terms of western transvestite and transsexual identities, rather than according to traditional understandings of fa'afafine. Some of these young fa'afafine opt for sex reassignment surgery. Don hastens to add that he is not simply opposed to sex reassignment surgery: he has some older fa'afafine friends who have waited years, ensuring that they are making the right decision, before going ahead with surgery. Nevertheless, he is concerned about the general westernization and subsequent degradation of fa'afafine identities, saying: 'I know of some of the traditional fa'afafines and each time I've gone back to Samoa it's always been the case "Oh gosh, we're being reduced to a ... cock in a frock" '.

Don's willingness to accept that some of his fa'afafine friends seek sex reassignment surgery, accompanied by his concern for younger fa'afafine who are completely seduced by Palagi understandings of sexuality and gender, remind me of Besnier's comment: 'Further discussion of gender liminality in Polynesia cannot take place without locating the category in a specific historical context and must address its relationship to modernization and change' (1994, p. 328). To this I add that discussion of transgenderism would benefit from further consideration of the effects of westernisation on gender liminality: not for the sake of a simplistic reclaiming of a 'third gender' [5] status, but for the sake of contextualising transgender theorising with respect to cross-cultural understandings of gender as those understandings change over time.

Some aspects of Don's reclaiming fa'afafine as a highly esteemed way of being and challenging Palagi approaches to sexuality and gender seem to me to work along similar lines to queer and transgendered critiques of psycho-medical discourses on transsexuality. He describes fa'afafine as inclusive and expansive in a way that is reminiscent of some authors' descriptions of queer (Goldman, 1996; Walters, 1996). He describes fa'afafine as encompassing gender-crossing possibilities similar to those discussed by some transgender authors (e.g., Stryker, 1994). Given that there are these parallels between Don's discourse on fa'afafine ways of being and some queer and transgender discourses, how might they inform one another more fruitfully? How might queer be theorised to better take into account Don's perspective of putting culture first and gender/sexuality second? Must there be such a prioritising for issues of racism, homophobia and transphobia to be effectively combated?

Perhaps fa'afafine identities provide an example of a crossing that can be sanctioned (for Don, if not for all fa'afafine) because family ties and the knowledge of cultural history are still sufficiently intact. This is different in cultural contexts where such historical ties have been lost. As Besnier points out, with the possible exceptions of New Zealand and Hawai'i,

Polynesian societies were generally not subjected to systematic annihilating efforts on the part of colonizing populations ... [so w]hile North American berdache traditions died out with the contexts that supported them, the cultural setting in which Polynesian gender liminality is embedded never disappeared. (p. 559, note 36)

Therefore, how might Don's perspective on gender liminality differ from those of people for whom such historical, cultural connections have been largely lost? What recourse do these people have for reclaiming culturally specific understandings of gender crossing?

Some Maaori transpeople are attempting to map discursive pathways for the purpose of reclaiming both cultural and queer identities. They juggle Maaori and transgendered identities in their attempts to hold specific forms of racialised gender liminality in high esteem. Issues of specific concern are: the lack (or inaccessibility) of knowledges about

pre-colonial concepts of gender and sexuality; the relative facility of accessing western psycho-medical discourses as ways of understanding experiences of gender liminality; the possible contradictions between medical and Maaori discourses on (transsexual) bodies; and the current power differential between Maaori and Pakeha which enables New Zealand laws (and therefore transsexuals' legal rights) to be dictated primarily by Pakeha (medical) understandings of sexed embodiment. According to New Zealand legislation at the time of writing this paper, it was possible for documentation relating to passports and marriage certificates to carry the post-transition gender marker (M or F) only after sex reassignment surgery had taken place (Alston, 1998a, b).

Tania provides an example of some of the dilemmas faced by Maaori gender liminal people. Whilst she is aware of queer and transgender critiques of compartmentalizing of gender and sexuality, and she has developed her own strident criticisms of the medicalisation of transsexuality, she finds it convenient at this early stage of her transition to use the idea of a 'transsexual' identity as somewhere to 'belong'. Like Stryker's monster, Tania is choosing to go through with medical procedures, while being critical of contemporary western conceptions of the body/psyche relationship upon which medicalised perspectives on transsexuality are based. On principle, she disagrees with the suggestion that she must have sex reassignment surgery to attain the legal rights of a woman, arguing that this reduces 'woman' to a vagina. In practice, she has decided to opt for sex reassignment surgery, a decision which she describes as relating partly to the current legal situation of non-operative transpeople in Aotearoa/New Zealand [6]. Tania finds it useful to think of sex reassignment surgery as a goal: something tangible to aim for.

Tania describes herself as moving in predominantly Maaori circles, and talks about Maaori women in general, and a Maaori male-to-female transgendered friend in particular, serving as role models in her development of her self as a woman. According to Tania, her transgendered friend appears to have been accepted by local Maaori insofar as she has authority as a woman during traditional gender-specific cultural rituals and practices. (Incidentally, this friend of Tania's is non-operative.) Tania talks about this person as very vocal and assertive in demanding acceptance as a woman within traditional Maaori contexts. Perhaps following her friend's lead, Tania has developed various arguments herself which validate her transsexuality and depend upon the assertion of her identity as Maaori. To explain this, she draws on the Maaori conception of identity as something which is never based in the individual alone but relates to the extended family (*whaanau*) and to genealogy (*whakapapa*). She argues that to deride her for being transsexual would be to denigrate her entire ancestral line: a far more risky and grave action than merely discriminating against an 'individual'.

Theorising transgender and queer more specifically to address race, indigenouness and colonisation might provide more discursive pathways for indigenous people struggling to live in gender liminal ways. For this purpose, it is vital to theorise queer so that it is more relevant and open to people for whom gender/sexuality identities come second to racial identities, and to theorise queer so that it is open to cross-cultural interpretations of the relationship between sexed embodiment and lived gender. By this means, the important work being done by transgenderists and queers who challenge medical definitions of sexualities and genders, may be accessible to a more racially diverse range of people who might otherwise find no recourse but to invest in medical discourses on transsexuality.

The other interviewee who talked about seeking ways to validate his Maaori identity and make sense of his gender liminal experiences is Pat. Unlike Tania, Pat invests

strongly and relatively uncritically in medical discourses on transsexuality. He is concerned with ‘paving the way’ for others who try to access female-to-male surgery as well as wanting to pass in every possible way as a heterosexual man. Whilst thinking of himself as a heterosexual man and wishing to masculinize his body as much as possible, Pat does not quite go so far as to maintain at all costs the ‘plausible history’ described by Stone. He is willing to be publicly visible as trans in order to change people’s attitudes, but wishes that he had simply been born ‘in the right body’ to start with. He repeated time and again how dissatisfied he is with his body, describing the enormous efforts he and his partner have made to access the medical services he wants. Both Pat and his partner explained their intense scepticism about the skills and attitudes of medical professionals in response to transsexuals, and said that it was important for them both to do as much research as they could to make sure that he was getting the best treatment possible.

The transgender rage which motivates Stryker to subvert medical discourses, for Pat is directed towards taking as much control over the medical process as possible: ensuring that he progresses as speedily and safely as possible towards the imagined ‘male’ body. Having been on hormones for some time, Pat is concerned about the effects of having hormones without surgery, suggesting that ‘getting testosterone pumped into your body every three weeks’ but ‘missing the main part ... [that] I should have been born with it in the first place’ is only adding to his sense of not being fulfilled. For Pat, there is no room for ambiguity and therefore medical discourses suit his purposes well—if only the surgery he wants becomes available to him.

From being adopted and growing up in a family where there was little chance of developing pride in his cultural heritage, Pat has found a niche where both his Maaori and his transgender identities can be respected and valued, though he sees himself ultimately moving toward just being a heterosexual man.

The area of Pat’s life where he describes most enthusiastically the meeting of his trans and Maaori identities is in the *kapa haka* (cultural performance) group to which he belongs. When he and his partner initially joined this group they were received unquestioningly as a heterosexual couple by the other group members, many of whom were gay men and women and ‘queens’. As Pat describes it, he eventually became tired of the queens always taking centre-stage and decided to out himself as trans. In his words: ‘everybody loves the queens ... and here I am amongst all these queens and [eventually, I say] “OK, OK, you’re queens, I’m King!”’. Upon realising that Pat, too, was trans, one of the queens who is skilled in Maaori tattoo art designed some tattoos to be drawn over his mastectomy scars for performances during which he and the other men are topless.

In Pat’s talk about his life, there is a tension between the simultaneous honouring of his Maaori and trans identities, and his striving towards simply being a heterosexual man (which he perceives to be achievable only through medical means). The only time Pat talked about transgender identity as something to be held in high esteem was when he talked about it in conjunction with his Maaori identity in the context of the *kapa haka* group. However, he spent a great deal of the interview talking about his frustration with medical professionals, his disappointment about the inaccessibility of the surgery he would like to have, and his desire to pass in all aspects of life as a heterosexual man. Unlike Halberstam, Pat neither embraces the idea of gender as a fiction nor wishes to live with his current mixing and matching of body parts. Unlike Stryker’s monster, Pat does not imagine himself rising from an operating table having found a way to be other than a medically constructed transsexual, or a conservatively defined heterosexual male.

If more strong and healthy images of Maaori gender liminal people were available to Pat, how might his relationship to medical discourses on transsexuality be different? How can Pat's sense of dissatisfaction with his body and frustration with medical processes be contrasted with Tania's critical investment in medical discourses and Don's complete distancing from western understandings of the relationship between sexed anatomy and lived gender? What other discursive means might Maaori gender liminal people employ to challenge the corporeal colonisation that is transsexuality? How can queer and trans academics and activists work race into theorising without making simplistic assumptions about indigenous cultures who can call on 'third gender' traditions, but by making queer theorising useful to indigenous people who seek culturally appropriate alternatives to medical discourses on transsexuality?

For Pat, becoming comfortable with his body, and with himself, may well mean reclaiming his cultural identity (hence the importance of the kapa haka group to him). In reclaiming his Maaori identity while striving to fit into the medical requirements for sex reassignment surgery, he is straddling two worlds that are potentially at odds with one another. If transgender theories were more inclusive of racialised Others, then Pat might be able to reclaim his cultural identity while reclaiming his (trans)gender identity, without having to straddle two conflicting worlds.

Transgender theorising offers important critiques of restrictive ways of understanding gender. Those critiques are necessarily culturally specific. In this paper, I seek to alert readers to the danger of championing transgenderism as offering cross-culturally applicable challenges to the medicalisation of transsexuality. I also present a discussion of empirical research that challenges the fantasy of the acceptance of gender liminality among indigenous Pacific peoples and that contributes a racialised component to transgenderists' descriptions of sex reassignment surgery as corporeal colonisation.

Conclusion

If we review transgender writings through lenses that disallow racial identity to be completely obscured by the passionate outpourings of transgender rage, how might transgender theorising come to 'look' different? If we think of colonisation as a process of rendering racialised bodies monstrous, how might we approach differently the reclaiming of transsexual bodies as monstrous? How might the postmodern strategy of mixing and matching of body parts be differentially available with regard to racialised bodies? How might investing in aspects of current transgender discourse amount to complicity with the colonising culture of which medical discourses are only a small part? How can transgender theorising be critical of its own racialised politics in a way that is productive for those who place race first and gender second? Perhaps Pat, performing topless in the kapa haka group—mastectomy scars overlaid with Maaori tattoo art—provides an illustration of how transgender and racial politics do not need to be approached in an either/or fashion, but can be worked together.

The questions I raise in relation to the living and theorising of gender liminality in a post-colonial context are inspired by, but not limited to, the concerns of gender liminal indigenous persons. Indeed, most of these issues are felt across transpeople of many racial identities, such as the on-going battles surrounding legal rights of transpeople, issues about accessibility and cost of medical procedures, and questions around the position of transsexuality within psycho-medical discourses. What I have chosen to highlight, however, is how these issues might require different subversive strategies, and different theoretical workings, according to the racial positioning of the transpeople concerned.

My purpose in doing this is to critique the way perspectives of whiteness [7] echo, largely unacknowledged, through transgender (and queer) theorising and to thus inspire more critical thinking about the racialised aspects of transgender bodies and gender liminal ways of being.

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NOTES

- [1] Maaori, also spelt Maori, is the collective name which refers to the various indigenous tribes of Aotearoa/New Zealand. I privilege the former spelling because it highlights the long vowel sound and appears to be the preferred spelling in Maaori language texts.
- [2] Pakeha is the Maaori word referring to the white people who colonised Aotearoa/New Zealand during the nineteenth century, and their descendants.
- [3] Fa'afafine is the Samoan word, literally meaning 'like a woman', that refers to anatomical males who live outside of the masculine gender role and take on feminine attributes and roles.
- [4] Palagi is the Samoan word referring to white people.
- [5] Besnier (1994) critiques the notion of fa'afafine as a third gender: pp. 320, 326–327.
- [6] The legal situation referred to here is that: without sex reassignment surgery Tania would be ineligible for a passport or other such legal documentation identifying her as female; were she sentenced to prison she would be sent to a men's prison; and were she to be dismissed from her place of employment on the grounds of her (trans)gender identity there would be little legal precedent and no definitive legislative ground upon which she could claim unfair dismissal. This may be contrasted with discrimination on the grounds of sexual identity which is explicitly prohibited by the Human Rights Act (1993).
- [7] For an inspiring model of writing whiteness overtly into texts, so that it is articulated as a racialised position rather than being normalized, see Frankenberg (1996).

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