

Decolonising trans-affirming language in Aotearoa

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I thank Lal Zimman for his thought-provoking piece on trans language activism (TLA) and sociolinguistic justice. Heeding his call for intersectional coalitions, I focus my comments on colonisation and decolonisation in trans-affirming language in Aotearoa (New Zealand).

Aotearoa is a settler colonial society, where Māori, the Indigenous people, have continuously resisted non-Māori dominance. Pākehā (non-Māori of European origin) are the largest population group at 70%, compared to Māori at 17% (2018 Census). Pākehā have imposed their social and cultural norms, resulting in the devastating loss of Māori language and culture. Although language revitalisation is occurring, most Māori mainly speak English. Issues relating to gender and language mirror those in other colonised countries, with Western gender discourses supplanting Indigenous ones (Clark, 2016). Each cultural context remains specific, and I will focus on what I see as the most pressing issues in Aotearoa. I am Pākehā, cisgender and queer. I offer my perspective as a sociolinguist and activist working in trans-affirming spaces, but my views do not hold the same weight as those of Indigenous trans people.

I will address three issues: problems associated with the use of Western-origin terms to refer to groups with experiences of colonisation, the challenge of de-centring whiteness in trans-affirming spaces and the rise of Indigenous efforts to decolonise language and gender.

1 | THE PROBLEMATIC NATURE OF WESTERN ORIGIN TERMS

Much discourse about trans issues in Aotearoa takes place in English, but Western terms do not adequately express non-Western gender identities. Many Māori now use the reclaimed term *takatāpui*, popularised by Māori scholars Kerekere (2017) and Te Awekotuku (2005). This term, originally used to refer to an intimate companion of the same sex, has taken on a broader meaning to refer to any

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Māori with a non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender identity: an umbrella term like queer or trans, but specifically Māori. Other Māori terms describe specific gender identities, some in longstanding use (e.g. whakawahine for transgender woman), others adapted from Western terms (e.g. irawhiti for transgender or irakore for agender). A Western intersectional approach is not well suited to considering the meaning of these terms. In te ao Māori (the Māori world view), a takatāpui identity is conceptualised not as an intersection of different identity categories but as one category within which these features cannot be disentangled:

Takatāpui is not an intersection of where Māori identity meets sexual orientation and gender identity or diverse bodies at a given point. Such a viewpoint would suggest that ‘Māori’ is inherently heterosexual and cis-gendered. [...] Being diverse is part of being Māori. (Kerekere, 2017: 46)

The use of Māori gender terms in English contrasts with the low linguistic prominence of gender in the Māori language, which has no grammatical gender and uses the non-gendered pronoun *ia* for he/she/they. When Māori gender terms are used in English, binary or non-binary pronouns appear around them and speakers operate in a colonised linguistic context. This reflects the colonisation of Māori gender norms more generally. Christian ideas were imposed on Māori, including restrictive Victorian norms of gender and sexuality. These were internalised, so that, despite a tradition of openness to gender and sexual fluidity (Kerekere, 2017), homophobia and transphobia exist among Māori today. As Zimman observes, ‘it is important to remember that transphobia is a cultural force, not something that (only) belongs to or lives within individuals’. When non-Māori criticise Māori for being transphobic, they are really criticising the effects of colonisation on Māori. Addressing transphobia requires addressing its structural causes, including the gendered history of colonisation.

Similar issues arise among Pacific people, who constitute 8% of the population and have experienced colonisation in the Islands and racism in Aotearoa. Pacific societies also have histories of gender and sexual fluidity that were suppressed through colonisation and a range of traditional terms referring to gender and sexuality. Pacific advocate Phylesha Brown-Acton developed a Pacific version of the LGBTQ+ acronym, MVPFAFF+, to refer to this collection of identities.¹ Pacific cultures remain highly influenced by Christianity, with ever-complexifying layers of colonisation regarding gender, sexuality and language. A Tongan speaker at a recent linguistics conference in Aotearoa spoke of the hateful origins of the most frequently used term for gay people in Tonga, derived from the Biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah. She suggested that these religious connotations made it challenging for Tongans to view gay people positively and that it would be better to use an Anglicism based on the word ‘homosexual’ with more neutral connotations. More neutral perhaps, but if an English-origin term is used to express a Tongan concept, queerness may be rejected as a Western imposition, when the Western imposition is really the idea that queerness has not always existed in Tonga. There are parallels here to Zimman’s discussion of *Latinx*, where the *-x* form, incompatible with the phonotactics of Spanish, is sometimes rejected by Spanish speakers as an instance of English and US imperialism. As Zimman notes, it is not coincidental that the same people who oppose the word *Latinx* tend to be ‘less than enthusiastic about affirming trans and non-binary identities’. In both sociolinguistic contexts, efforts towards trans-affirming language ‘can be derailed by objections about imperialism, excusing or even promoting transphobia in the name of anti-colonial resistance’.

The question of which terms affirm trans and queer people in Aotearoa is far from settled. The proliferation and contestation of identity terms is not unique to settler-colonial societies, but it takes on extra layers of complexity. Aside from the conceptual and ideological issues touched on above,

the sheer number of terms poses practical issues for research with trans communities. A recruitment flyer cannot easily encompass all the terms people use to describe themselves, but choosing to go with 'transgender' alone will certainly exclude many, if not most.

2 | DE-CENTRING WHITENESS IN TRANS-AFFIRMING SPACES

A common finding in research with trans communities in Aotearoa is that trans people of non-Pākehā ethnicities feel alienated in both ethnic and queer spaces due to intersectional oppression (Bal & Divakalala, 2022; Thomsen et al., 2023). In my experience, trans-affirming organisations do genuinely want to include non-Pākehā trans people in their governing bodies and activities. It is in these spaces that I have witnessed the most considered reflection on the connections between trans liberation and decolonisation. Nevertheless, they remain dominated by Pākehā at all levels, echoing the dominance of whiteness Zimman describes in the USA when he notes that 'the most visible and well-resourced types of trans (language) activism tend to represent the perspectives of relatively privileged trans people'. A Māori friend told me her daughters had stopped attending events at one of these organisations because they felt like 'cocoa pops in a sea of rice bubbles'.

This disconnect between intention and reality is partly due to ignorance among Pākehā that all gender expressions are cultural. What may seem to them to be a universal expression of gender inclusivity may be experienced by non-Pākehā as cultural exclusion. One example is the use of the term 'rainbow' in Aotearoa. This is the most common adjective used to describe queer people collectively in Pākehā-led public policy and public-facing activism. This term is not used this way in other countries. Rainbows are used visually elsewhere to index queer people, but other terms are used to describe them, for example LGBTQ+ is more common in the USA. Pākehā queer activists in Aotearoa use the term 'rainbow people' in public outreach, but not often to describe themselves; they are more likely to use queer or another Western identity term. Yet I scarcely hear people discussing these distinctions. On a rare occasion during a 'rainbow network' meeting at my university, an older group member said he disliked the use of 'rainbow' as it sounded sugary and sanitising, whereas 'queer' had more political and revolutionary connotations. When we did a small survey of students, however, there was a strong preference for 'rainbow'. It is perhaps precisely the less political connotations of this term that work in favour of organisations attempting to improve outcomes for 'rainbow youth'. In Aotearoa, almost everyone now knows what 'rainbow people' means, even if they do not support rainbow communities. They are less likely to know this is a specifically Pākehā term, used in distinctive ways for strategic purposes. If we are not even aware of how we are using language ourselves, it is hard to step outside it to incorporate other cultural perspectives.

3 | DECOLONISING LANGUAGE AND GENDER

What is the way forward for trans-affirming language in Aotearoa? At the grassroots level, there is a strong appetite for decolonisation. Some decolonisation efforts take linguistic forms, for example the increasing use of 'Aotearoa' to name the country and the growing adoption of Māori language names for cities and towns. In the trans-affirming space, the rediscovery and celebration of the term *takatāpui* is one example of linguistic decolonisation. In my research with parents of trans children in Aotearoa, I also heard Māori and Pacific parents using decolonising discourses to affirm their children's gender (de Bres & Morrison-Young, 2024). A *takatāpui* mother of a trans teen observed that:

Something for me coming from a te ao Māori perspective is the belief that we inherit wairua [spirit] from our ancestors, from our tūpuna. Being able to look at it from that perspective and to say to my son ‘you are your ancestor, there was someone in our ancestry who was like you, and you’ve inherited that and that is totally natural and normal’ has really helped me to understand and accept a bit more. It is very affirming for my son, the belief that that is where his wairua has come from. Because we have so many trans cousins, at least one of our tūpuna was, and that has passed to him. He looks at that as an affirmation of his Māori identity.

As Zimman reminds us, such decolonising discourses represent informal instances of TLA, alongside formal advocacy for institutional change.

It is vital that we better include Indigenous and non-white perspectives in research on language and gender. Zimman observes that the field of sociolinguistics is increasingly reckoning with racism and colonialism, opening up opportunities for ‘collectively resisting these systems and their interlocking relationship with transphobia and gender normativity’. Similarly, the field of transgender studies is (slowly) coming to terms with its cultural biases. The cultural history of transness has been described as largely a history of trans white experiences in which ‘the universalizing of “transgender” perpetuates a white and predominately middle-class transgender experience, identity, and collective’ (de Vries, 2012: 64). There is some movement towards intersectional research (de Vries & Sojka, 2022; Paz Galupo & Campbell Orphanidys, 2022), but much work in my research area of family support of trans children remains extremely white (de Bres, 2022). In only reporting on this group’s perspectives, we exclude huge numbers of people and miss large swathes of potentially transformative knowledge. If we are to advance Zimman’s call for sociolinguistic justice in TLA, we must decolonise trans-affirming language.

ENDNOTE

ⁱThe terms included are Mahu (Hawai’i and Tahiti), Vaka sa lewa lewa (Fiji), Palopa (Papua New Guinea), Fa’afafine (Samoa), Akava’ine (Rarotonga), Fakaleiti (Tonga) and Fakaafifine (Niue). Some of these have previously been used as slurs and are being reclaimed, whereas others have positive connotations.

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