Trans People's Linguistic Self-determination
and the Dialogic Nature of Identity

Lal Zimman

Language plays a central role in trans experience. In the United States and many other parts of the English-speaking world, gendered terminology and other linguistic concerns have long been highlighted in the work of trans activists. In a sense, transgender identity is not only a matter of how one presents one's gender or what kinds of spaces one is licensed to occupy, but also a matter of linguistic agency – about who determines the meanings of words and how those words are linked up to different types of persons. Trans activists have developed a particular understanding of linguistic agency, which is best understood as a form of *linguistic self-determination* (building on Stanley 2014) that centres the desires of individuals regarding how others should refer to them.

This essay focuses on a set of practices through which linguistic self-determination is realised and the particular sociocultural context that has enabled the emergence of this individualistic understanding of identity. It draws on over ten years of fieldwork in transgender communities in urban areas in the western United States as well as in global networks of English-speaking trans people who participate collectively in internet-mediated spaces. After outlining the characteristics of

linguistic self-determination broadly, I discuss several practices that illustrate the workings of linguistic self-determination in these communities. Specifically, I point to gendered labels, pronouns and body-part terminology as three arenas in which self-identification has exerted an increasingly powerful influence, both within trans communities and among cisgender allies. Linguistic self-determination is an obvious source of empowerment for trans people because of the way it opens up space for the articulation of gender identities that are not socially sanctioned. While keeping in mind the liberatory and subversive potential of self-identification, it is also useful to consider the cultural and historical specificity of this perspective on identity. The discussion below situates linguistic self-determination within the broader frame of neoliberal individualism, demanding a more complex perspective on linguistic power and subversion. As is often the case with late modern discourses of self-determination (see Inoue 2007), an emphasis on individual freedom may erase the power dynamics that constrain some individuals' agency more severely than others.

Self-determination and self-identification as cultural practice

Contemporary transgender identity is rooted in a particular model of gender in which each individual is the ultimate source of authority regarding their own gender identity. Academic theorising of trans experience, however, has not always captured this logic. For instance, in the 1990s trans people were alternately held up as the ultimate gender transgressors (e.g. in many readings of Butler 1990) or else criticised for failing to destroy the entire gender system (see Lorber 1994, Hubbard 1998). In the latter case, authors often pointed to the gender stereotypes they saw trans people fulfilling as a sign

that trans people may actually be more gender-conforming than cisgender (non-trans) people are. Others pointed to the narratives that trans people produce about their identities, in which gender stereotypes may be invoked to legitimise their identities. There are a variety of more nuanced explanations for these observations which would be enhanced by contextual analysis, including attention to what trans people's actual goals might be. Even as many trans people challenge conventional understandings of gender, trans activism is not necessarily aimed at undoing gender or breaking the gender binary. Some clearly is – particularly the social changes pioneered by non-binary trans people – but the most broadly shared discourses about the transformation of the gender system primarily concern breaking the link between gender identity and expression on one hand and genital configuration, among other elements of sexual embodiment, on the other. Trans identity is often framed in terms of a conflict between one's embodiment and one's identity, but a more apt framing would be that trans identities reject the assumption that a body and a gender identity can be 'in conflict' or 'in alignment' to begin with (Zimman 2014). Instead, bodies and gender identities are recognised as distinct elements of selfhood that can be combined in any number of ways.

But this understanding of trans identity is neither inevitable nor universal (see Valentine 2007 on the spread and development of contemporary transgender identity in the 1990s). The notion that gender is a matter of self-identification, distinct from the way the body is assigned meanings within a given community, is made possible by a particular kind of cultural framing of the body and the self. One core element of this mode of thinking is the division between mind and body, which philosophers often source to Descartes's *cogito*. The notion that the body is a vessel for the mind, or soul, is necessary if gender identity is to be treated as an internal

experience that is distinct from the physical form of the body. This thinking long predates words like *transgender*; some of the earliest recorded discourses about what we now understand as trans identity can be found in the writing of German sexologists like Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, who at the end of the 19th century described certain individuals (Ulrichs included) as having 'a female soul enclosed within a male body' (*anima muliebris virili corpore inclusa*; Stryker 2008, 37). The notion of being 'trapped' or born into 'the wrong body' remains a powerful metaphor for transgender identity, even as many trans people resist this characterisation (see Bornstein 1995). Even with this resistance, however, what remains is a sense that a person can have a kind of inner self-knowledge that transcends the body's sexual phenotype.

Knowledge that the self truly *is* a woman, man, or non-binary person contrasts sharply with the perspective that trans identity represents a desire to *become* a woman, man, or non-binary person through physiological transformation. In addition to the separation of mind and body, then, is an epistemological model of the self as a truth that can be known (per Butler 1990). Furthermore, knowledge of the self is cast as something that can be accessed only by the individual in question. This contrasts with other frameworks of knowledge about the mind, such as psychoanalysis, as well as the history of diagnosis of transsexuality. Medical guidelines for the treatment of transsexuality, which have historically derived from the accounts provided by Benjamin (1966), have often required trans people to be subjected to therapeutic

evaluation, to determine whether the patient truly is trans.[1] Trans discourses of self-determination, then, have developed in part as a response to the idea that cisgender psychologists are best positioned to determine people's 'true' gender identities, even if it is in conflict with how individuals view themselves.

In addition to a separation of mind and body and an epistemological model of the self, self-identification is closely linked to the notion of self-determination, which in trans communities encompasses both the individual's right to identify their own gender identity and their right to modify and present their body in a way that reflects a personalised sense of self. In this sense, trans identity is rooted in a kind of cultivation of the self that shares properties with neoliberal cultural practices described by Inoue (2007). Based on her research in a Tokyo corporation, Inoue's focus is on the role of self-responsibility as a discourse for contextualising gender inequality in the workplace. She argues it is neoliberal individualism that allows a corporation to treat an individual woman's behaviour as both the cause of and solution to her lower compensation and unequal promotions in the workplace. Individuals are the problem because gender inequality at work is presented as arising from women's failure to express their desire for professional advancement. It purports to be a solution as well, as women are invited to workshops that teach them, essentially, how to 'lean in' (to use the terminology of Sandberg 2013). Most crucially, the same discourses that produce women's agency to

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1 In my United States-based fieldwork sites, most trans people have access to transition-related care through informed consent, a standard medical model that allows patients to decide which medications to take or which surgical procedures to pursue rather than requiring approval from a therapist beforehand. However, as insurance companies begin to cover the expenses of medical transition, external approval has again become a requirement in many systems to receive coverage. Countries with nationalised healthcare systems may require evaluations by psychologists for similar reasons.

assert their self-determination in the professional sphere can simultaneously mask the structural constraints that limit the exercise of that agency.

In this essay I would like to suggest that discourses of linguistic self-determination risk the same fate should they not recognise how the capacity to self-identify is unevenly distributed. Gender self-identification clearly offers a powerful form of resistance to oppressive systems in which medico-legal authorities assign certain expectations for an individual's gender role, identity and expression based on particular readings of their body. But such a deeply neoliberal take on identity may also serve to obscure the ways in which the agency to self-identify is systematically limited along predictable lines of power and oppression. In the process, it may obscure the collaborative process of identity construction and, crucially, the fact that we are all collectively implicated in the construction of one another's identities. To tap into the kinds of contexts that enable practices of linguistic self-determination, it is useful to consider which aspects of the self are open to self-identification and who can claim the right to self-identify. From here I turn to three aspects of language reform in trans communities that have been linked to an expansion in the scope of self-identification: terminology for types of gendered persons, grammatical gender forms (i.e. third person pronouns) and lexical items that relate to embodied sex.

Linguistic practices of self-determination

While self-determination has its roots in centuries-old philosophical traditions, it's also clear that the formulations of linguistic self-determination found in trans communities have shifted significantly over the past few decades. I begin in this section with the most basic elements of trans language

reform, which concerns the use of overtly gendered labels that are applied to different types of persons. I then discuss pronouns, which have more recently become the subject of overt attention separate from the matters addressed by gendered nouns and adjectives. Finally, I discuss the body as an example of the way discursive self-identification can extend to the material realm. Overall, these practices suggest a simultaneous fracturing of linguistic expressions of gender that enable productive recombinations of elements and a proliferation of modes through which linguistic self-determination can be enacted.

Gender categories

In the 1990s, the study of transgender people took on new life with the rise of queer theory, and a number of social scientists took an interest in the narratives trans people tell in order to account for and authenticate their identities. Authors like Lorber (1994), Mason-Schrock (1996), Gagné, Tewksbury and McGaughey (1997), and Hubbard (1998) problematised what they saw as trans models of identity in which fulfillment of gender stereotypes was necessary in order to claim access to (wo) manhood. It is worth noting, then, that in dozens upon dozens of interviews, conversations, and other recordings made with trans participants in my research, I have never heard gender stereotypes invoked to legitimate one's identity as a woman or a man – except, perhaps, in parodies or critiques of normative ideas about gender. Particularly in explicit discussions of what makes a person a woman or a man, the most common definition trans people offer is that a woman is a person who self-identifies as a woman, a man is someone who self-identifies as a man, and the same applies for other permutations of gender identities, such as non-binary identities, trans identity,

and so on. Gender labels are stripped of semantic content and instead become fuzzy concepts whose usage rests primarily on phenomenological grounds. That is, when asked why one might self-identify as a woman, man, both, or neither, trans people often draw on experiential legitimations, frequently grounded in affect: because it *feels right* or *feels good* to express that identity and have it recognised by others.

The destabilisation of gendered labels is a crucial step in the formation of linguistic self-determination. It also carries clear potential to disrupt biological determinism concerning the assignment of gender categories. Yet the selection of words that function primarily to identify gender categories, like *woman*, *girl* or *female*, are only the most obvious way speakers gender one another through the English lexicon. The linguistic gendering process does not end with words that have gender as a semantic entailment – i.e. as part of their core definition. At the lexical level alone, the process extends to any number of subtler lexical choices, such as the use of complimentary terms like *beautiful* or *handsome*, insult terms like *bitch* or *asshole*, and address forms like *sweetie* or *dude*. All of these interpolate certain kinds of gendered positionalities for their referents or addressees. Because these are indirect indexes of gender that are not exclusive to one gender or another (per Ochs 1992), they may not stand out as much as requiring conscious linguistic modification. Because they are less obvious as indexes of gender, these words are often taken by trans people as indicators of how the speaker *really* views the referent. Grammatical gender, including pronouns, offers another resource for constructing one another's gender that typically operates automatically on the basis of split-second perceptions of the referent's gender or sex.

Pronouns

In English, the expression of grammatical gender is limited primarily to the third person pronouns *she*, *her* and *hers* and *he*, *him* and *his*. Ochs identifies grammatical gender forms, like pronouns, as one of only a few direct indexes of gender that are meant to be applied exclusively to one gender or another. Of course, even direct indexes of gender can be appropriated, as when gay men build camaraderie (or enact cattiness) by referring to one another as *she* and *her* (Kulick 2000) or when a football coach derides male players by calling them *girls*. Yet these uses are typically marked and viewed as non-serious, since direct indexes of gender are only truly licensed in reference to the appropriate side of the gender binary. In the dominant system, pronoun assignment derives from the speaker's reading of a referent's body as either female or male, and interactants may go to extreme lengths to determine which pronoun to use without having to ask the person in question – a question that is often seen as a grave insult. As Zimman (forthcoming) discusses, trans people who identify outside of the binary system have been particularly instrumental in promoting the practice of asking people directly how they wish to be *pronouned*, as some communities put it. In contexts where someone is uncertain about which pronoun to use, they typically look for signs such as physiological characteristics, clothing choices, speech, gesture and so on. What is particularly remarkable about the relatively new practice of asking people about their pronouns in trans communities is the view that knowing a person's gender identification is not enough to determine which pronouns should be used. Knowing that someone identifies as non-binary certainly is not enough to know which pronouns they want others to use, since many non-binary gendered pronouns are available: *they/them/theirs*, *ze/hir/hirs*, *ey/em/eirs*, one of the binary options, alternations

between binary pronouns, avoidance of pronouns altogether, etc. But the most important principle behind pronoun checks is that no one's pronouns should be assumed. Rather than employing this practice only for those who are visibly gender-ambiguous or non-conforming, the idea is that even those who appear normatively gendered may not use the pronouns others presume, such that even someone who identifies as a woman may not always wish to be called *she* and that someone who self-identifies as a man may not always want to be called *he*.

The convention of divorcing gender identity terms from gendered pronouns creates an interesting form of linguistic fragmentation, in which each level of gendered language offers a separate realm for self-identification. A great deal of metalinguistic work goes into the ongoing emergence *pronoun checks*, as they are sometimes called (Zimman, forthcoming). For instance, the phrase *preferred pronouns* was initially introduced as a way to talk about pronoun self-determination, but this phraseology was quickly challenged by those who felt the word *preference* frames pronouns as a trivial matter that can be overlooked when inconvenient rather than a deeply important matter in which speakers choose to either affirm or delegitimise a trans person's identity and agency. Many trans people who promote pronoun checks thus employ verbs like *use* rather than *prefer* when talking about pronouns ('What pronouns do you use?').

Biological sex

The most striking example of linguistic self-determination comes from the way trans people talk about biological sex. Rather than stopping at gender identity, which by now is recognised by many outside of academia as a social construction, trans speakers extend their practices of self-identification to the

material body. In this sense, self-identification does not merely push back against the demand for a normative link between gender identity and embodied sex, but also reformulates the gendered meanings ascribed to the body itself.

For a deeper consideration of this practice it is instructive to turn to an analysis of one popular online community for trans men that was active between 2001 and 2015, which had several hundred subscribed users at any given time and garnered at least one post per day for at least 3969 days during the specified timeframe. A subset of interactions in this community is analysed by Zimman (2014), in which I argue that trans people's non-normative combinations of traditionally 'female' and 'male' genital lexica reveals an alternative way of constructing sex. Despite its framing as an objective medical or scientific distinction with technical definitions that cannot be subverted, the notion that bodies can be non-problematically divided into two sexual categories based on universal criteria is itself a culturally and historically specific perspective. Historians like Laqueur (1990) and anthropologists like Herdt (1993) have long demonstrated that different understandings of the body arise in different cultural and temporal contexts, which opens up the possibility that we may find alternative logics for physiological sex even among members of the 'same culture'.

It is the hegemonic model of sex, in which a person's embodiment is defined by membership in one of two genital-based categories, that has allowed cisgender (i.e. non-transgender) individuals to be referred to as *bio(logical) women* or *men*, meaning that trans women are not biologically female and that trans men are not biologically men, regardless of how their bodies may have been modified. It is also from this perspective that people may acquire a definition of trans people as having a 'mismatch' of gender and sex; for this to be possible, gender must be somehow changeable or open to self-identification, while sex remains a static, material

fact. But there is a counter-discourse that has rapidly gained in popularity within trans communities over the past two decades, which can be seen growing in strength within the life of the online discussion group mentioned above. Here again, individual agency and self-identification are placed at the center of legitimate and appropriate linguistic usage. Rather than defined by the presence or absence of certain parts, a male body becomes 'the body of a male-identified person' or, even more specifically, someone who self-identifies as male-bodied (*mutatis mutandis* for female bodies, trans bodies, and so on). With this change in thinking comes a shift in how non-trans people are referred to as well, with *cisgender* and *non-trans* almost completely replacing language like *genetic female* or *bio(logical) male*, particularly in English-medium online communities for trans people.

In the online community for trans men discussed by Zimman (2014; also Zimman and Hall 2009), talk about the body is a common interactional theme, presenting ongoing challenges for how to talk about non-normatively sexed bodies without undermining each individual's linguistic self-determination. Vernacular male terminology, particularly *dick* or *cock*, constitutes by far the most common strategy for referring to trans men's bodies in this community, accounting for 1332 (56.1%) out of 2371 total instances of genital terminology in the data subset analysed thus far. Notably, the body parts being referred to as *dicks* are generally not typical penises of the sort associated with cisgender men, nor even the penises of trans men who have had genital reconstruction. Instead, trans men draw on their knowledge of the structural homology between penises and clitorises, which is enhanced by the genital growth caused by testosterone therapy, to refer to their surgically unmodified genitals as male. Perhaps more strikingly, we can also find many cases where members talk about their genitals using traditionally 'female' lexical items

(n = 347, 14.6%), including medicoscientific terms like *vagina* and more vernacular options like *pussy*. Because of the rupture trans people experience between their perception of their own gender and others' perceptions of their bodies, speakers can invoke normatively female language without casting themselves as female; indeed, a vagina need not be a female body part at all for members of this community if the person embodying said vagina does not regard it as such. Nor could such a body part be characterised with the word *vagina* if that is not how the individual likes to refer to it.

Predictably, we also find other strategies such as ambiguous language like *privates* or *down there* (n = 673, 28.4%) and explicit compounds or blends like *boycunt*, *manpussy* or *mangina* (n = 19, < 1%). Speakers clearly have fun with some of these linguistic strategies even as they are also taken quite seriously; some of the biggest interactional explosions seen in this community arise over members' use of language that other members find problematic or offensive, including the use of purportedly female terminology to refer to trans men. This potential for conflict manifests a tendency to speak specifically about one's own body, rather than referring to trans bodies in general, even when seeking fairly general information or asking about others' experiences (Zimman 2014).

And here, as with pronouns, linguistic self-determination splinters into various aspects of language that cannot be assumed to line up in expected ways. Just because someone identifies as a man does not mean he (or they or even she) refers to gendered body parts using normatively male words. Dave, a trans man I worked with for a long-term project on vocal change among trans people on testosterone (Zimman 2012, 2017) was strongly male-identified, but just as strongly rejected the idea that he was male-bodied and preferred his sexual partners *not* use 'male' body part terminology for him. Just as with pronouns, it has become common for explicit discussions

of language for the body to be part of the negotiation of sexual liaisons between trans people as well as those between trans people and cisgender allies.

As with other elements of linguistic self-determination, the practices outlined here denaturalise dominating ideas about the sexual binary by imbuing individuals with far greater agency over how others should talk about them. As a whole, the practices just described point to a splintering of linguistic expressions of gender that enable for productive and unexpected recombinations of elements. They also present a proliferation of modes through which linguistic self-determination can be enacted. At the same time, this emphasis on a solitary self with a kind of isolated agency does not fully square with the theories of identity developed by sociocultural linguists. The next section points to some of the hidden implications of linguistic self-determination.

Limitations of linguistic self-determination

The kinds of self-identification described in this essay bear an interesting connection to a series of publications on the theorisation of identity in the field of language and sexuality in the early 2000s. Kulick and Cameron (2003, also Kulick 2000) mounted a critique of what they saw as overly simplistic approaches to language and identity in which sexuality is reduced to which label a person claims for themselves (*gay*, *straight*, etc.), rendering a static, essentialising, individualistic and deterministic view of social subjectivity. They suggest scholars might think in terms of *identification* rather than *identity*. Bucholtz and Hall (2004, 2005) took this critique as an opportunity to articulate a framework for the study of language and identity that they call the *tactics of intersubjectivity*. In contrast to Kulick and Cameron's characterisations of the

study of language and identity, Bucholtz and Hall suggest that there is no useful distinction to be made between identity and identification, because identity itself is fluid, collaborative and built through a holistic set of social practices rather than simply claiming a label – a perspective already evident in much of the research on language and sexuality.

With both camps in this debate agreeing that identity is a collaborative endeavour, it is notable that the model of trans people's linguistic self-determination described above takes a far more isolated view of identity. Indeed, it strongly resembles what theorists of language and identity have argued against. Of course, this is not because trans people don't care how others view them or aren't aware of the impact others have on their identities – being correctly gendered by others is one of the primary goals of transition for many trans individuals. But because the discourse of gender identification is so focused on the self, it stops short of directly implicating others in the process of identity construction. It also fails to reflect what happens after a person self-identifies, which frequently involves disputes over the legitimacy of self-identified genders. If identity is always dialogic, as Bucholtz and Hall (among others) argue, then trans people cannot truly identify on their own. A trans person's self-identified gender can be responded to in any number of ways, and these responses have enormous material effects on what kind of identity a trans person is able to articulate.

Importantly, this argument should not be taken as a condemnation of self-identification as a mode of identity formation, but rather as a call to attend to the shortcomings of discourses surrounding self-identification with the hope that greater reflexivity will create more room for gender recognition for all trans people.

'Call me Caitlyn'

One striking example of public identification by a trans person comes from the summer of 2015, when Caitlyn Jenner came out as a trans woman on the cover of *Vanity Fair*. Jenner's transition created something of a firestorm in the media if only because of the dramatic nature of her transition from masculine Olympic hero to stunningly beautiful sophisticate. In some ways Jenner's coming out recalled that of Christine Jorgensen, a transsexual woman whose 1952 transition resulted in headlines like 'Ex-GI Becomes Blond Beauty' across the United States (Stryker 2008), introducing much of the American public to transsexualism for the first time. Both Jenner and Jorgensen were beautiful white women who had previously occupied well-regarded masculine social roles (an athlete and an army private, respectively) before coming out as trans. Both had financial means sufficient to transition without facing many of the barriers and waiting periods commonly experienced by less economically privileged trans people. Both received headline attention announcing their new identities. Neither was universally accepted, but both experienced a higher degree of public affirmation than might be expected given the experience of their contemporaries.

The cover of the July 2015 issue of *Vanity Fair* shows Caitlyn Jenner in a white bustier, with legs, arms and shoulders exposed. Her legs are crossed slightly as she leans back onto a stool with her arms behind her back. Long brown curls fall over her right shoulder and her face displays a coy smile and a beckoning gaze. The text running across Jenner's hourglass midsection speaks in her voice: 'Call me Caitlyn'. Her imperative calls the reader into a dialogue, interpolating the audience into the position of interlocutor. It is a kind of dual interpolation, though, as she not only hails us but does so in order that we might hail her back in a particular way. The importance of this statement is reflected in the responses to Jenner's coming out, such as tweets (public

messages on Twitter) from other celebrities congratulating her by name. The interpolation is unavoidable, even for those who refuse it, as when a former child actor tweeted, without any further contextualisation, 'Sorry....still calling you Bruce' (Jenner's former name) on the day of her big reveal (*Daily Mail*, 2 June 2015). The tweet was deleted by its author, followed by an apology, but this individual was hardly alone; before it was deleted, the messages was retweeted by at least 3350 others on Twitter. In this sense, the interpolation of reader as interlocutor was highly successful.

But what of the conditions of Jenner's success? First, she is famous, white and wealthy. Of course, this was all true in the weeks and months before she came out as trans, at which point she had been an object of ridicule in certain media outlets. Her transformation into a beautiful, normatively feminine woman was clearly relevant as well. Jenner could afford any transition-related expenses as soon as she encountered them, and did not have to engage in black market economies to survive or to pay for hormonal or surgical care. She was the type of person who could garner attention from a magazine like *Vanity Fair* that would allow her to talk back in a public venue to the negative attention she would inevitably receive as a trans woman. She is literally the only trans person to ever have this particular combination of privileges.

After Jenner's *Vanity Fair* article, discussions within the trans community were largely focused on the positive reception she had received. Some took this as a mark of culmination of decades of community activism, but others wondered why Jenner seemed to be treated with so much more respect than the majority of trans people, who continue to face 'epidemic' levels of discrimination, poverty and violence (Grant et al. 2012). One manifestation of this response came from an online meme in which trans people would use a *Vanity Fair* cover template, superimpose their own photograph, and

complete the construction 'Call me [name]', asserting their own subjectivity by borrowing Jenner's powerful words. One Tumblr blog collected well over 200 images created by trans women, men and non-binary individuals using the hashtag #MyVanityFairCover. This momentary collaboration among trans people who wanted to know 'Where's my *Vanity Fair* cover?' opened up a site for critical reflection on the power of trans people to self-identify. In the same year that Jenner was widely accepted as a woman, the murders of trans people – mostly women of colour – were reported at a higher rate than ever before (see Zimman forthcoming for more). This juxtaposition of extreme success and extreme violence speaks to the chasm that separates relatively privileged trans people from those whose lives are also shaped by the intersecting violences of cissexism, racism, poverty and classism, ableism and homophobia.

The *Vanity Fair* cover meme can be seen as an attempt to grab a small portion of the power Jenner had when she told the world how to address her. The purpose of appropriating this phrase, then, is to re-voice the power Jenner asserts and to make the stance available to trans people who will never appear on a magazine cover. To quote the MyVanityFairCover Tumblr:

> This is a trans pride blog made to showcase the wonderful variety that exists within the transgender community above and beyond what we're showing in the mainstream media. Ever since *Vanity Fair* announced their Caitlyn Jenner's [sic] cover story, many trans people have voiced their concerns that the world only seems to embrace us if we're wealthy enough or lucky enough to adhere to white, cisnormative beauty standards. [. . .] And whether we fit those standards or not, we're beautiful, and we all deserve to feel beautiful, and to be acknowledged by the world. [. . .] As a good friend of mine said Monday 'Where's my *Vanity Fair* cover?'

Of course, the fact remains that none of the trans individuals featured on this site was actually on the cover of *Vanity Fair*, and few of them have access to the kinds of privilege Jenner enjoys. While Jenner has the institutional support and material resources to instruct the reader to call her Caitlyn, her power was for many trans people a reminder of the power they lack. Words are powerful tools that allow their bearers to reimagine reality, but the power they carry is not equally available to every voice. And it is in this way that Jenner's declaration of her identity, and the reception she received, highlights the unevenness of what happens after a trans person self-identifies. Though all trans people purportedly share an ability to define themselves linguistically, the responses to those self-identifications are anything but equal. Structural privilege provides a solid foundation on which individualistic claims about identity can be made, yet many trans people find themselves on unstable ground, with identities built on discourse that looks more monologic than dialogic. In this way, gendered self-identification reproduces the overarching logic of neoliberal equality. The self-driven process that produces the trans subject, in this case, also erases the means of that production. In the absence of a million followers on Twitter, who is listening to the self-identification in which trans people are engaged?

Conclusion

The critical examination of self-identification offered in this essay is not something I have undertaken lightly. Linguistic self-determination has been an incredibly powerful force for trans liberation, and many of the advances trans people have fought for have been built on that foundation. Nothing written here should be taken as a call to undo self-identification, but

rather an attempt to expand the discourse of identification to fully recognise that it is practiced by both the self and the other.

Trans people, of course, are fully aware of and frequently discuss the fact that certain trans people's identities are affirmed more readily than others'. Among the most vulnerable are those who do not fit cisnormative body ideals or who remain visibly trans, those who cannot or do not want to transition medically, those who are hypervisible by virtue of their identity or presentation (e.g. as non-binary, as femmes), those who lack steady employment, housing and healthcare, and those who face incarceration, detention and other forms of violence from the state.

The discourse of self-identification is not descriptive but normative: it is a principle that what *should* matter most is how a person sees themselves, and that this should dictate how they are treated by others. But the ideal of self-determination is only ideal in a certain cultural context, and the neoliberal context of linguistic self-determination erases the responsibility we all carry for seeing, or refusing to see, one another in ways that affirm our lives and our dignities. What concerns me about the discourse of self-identification is primarily the ways it might be received by those who are not steeped in the logic of trans identity practices. Actor and comedian Patton Oswalt, for instance, recently released a stand-up comedy special in which he criticised trans activists' focus on language as misguided (Oswalt 2016). In this joke, he characterises the best form of trans allyhood as a 'hands off' approach in which people are allowed to identify and present themselves however they want but does not involve cis people affirming that identity through practices like appropriate pronoun use or even the avoidance of overt transphobic slurs. Oswalt voices a Southern-accented parody of a person who uses virulently transphobic language while simultaneously embodying the message 'I don't care what [trans people] do'. 'That's the guy you want on your

side!' Oswalt exclaimed in a live version of this performance just prior to taping his special (Oswalt 2016). In other words, it doesn't matter what language people use, so long as they don't interfere with trans people's right to call themselves or dress however they like. In a neoliberal context that prioritises self-determination, individualism cuts both ways. It opens the possibility for a stance that asserts 'If I can't tell you what to call yourself, you can't tell me what to call you.'

This, of course, misses the entire point of the critique that trans language reforms levy. Self-identification is ultimately *not* just about the self; it is at least as much concerned with the voices of others. As scholars of language and social meaning, we may be able to offer theoretical tools that enhance folk theories of language and the self and potentiate their critical power. In this case, a focus on dialogicality draws attention to the collective identity-building practices that characterise everyday life for trans and cis people alike. With hope, the recent spike of interest in trans experience among sociocultural linguists foreshadows a long collaborative relationship on the importance of power, language and the self.

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