
Book Review

Transforming Bodies: Gendered Stories of Embodied Change

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Victoria Kannen's *Transforming Bodies: Gendered Stories of Embodied Change* is a nuanced analysis across seven chapters that examines the meanings of bodily transformation, gender identities, social forces, and resistance. Drawing on personal narratives, scholarly literature (e.g., sociology, gender and race studies, Queer studies, fat studies, disability studies, and more), and her own experiences, Kannen offers a rich exploration of changing embodiments in a journey of inquiry and insight.

Kannen is a Professor of Sociology, whose teaching and research centre on identity, embodiment, education, and popular culture. Her earlier monograph, *Gendered Bodies and Public Scrutiny: Women's Stories of Staring, Strangers, and Fierce Resistance*, examines how women's bodies evoke awe, invite judgment, and endure varied forms of public scrutiny, an exploration that enriches and complements the concerns of the book reviewed here.

Grounded in the narratives of fourteen individuals, *Transforming Bodies* traces key thematic patterns that emerge across their accounts. The opening chapters, 'Bodies' and 'Intersections', lay the conceptual groundwork for reading the gendered body. Subsequent chapters, 'Shapes' and 'Ages and Dis/Abilities,' explore more explicit bodily changes, such as weight loss, ageing, and disability, before concluding with more nuanced and less anticipated forms of transformation in 'Names', 'Performances,' and 'Bodies Transform'.

The book addresses a broad spectrum of bodily transformations: gender affirmation practices, ageing, disabilities, weight fluctuations, hairstyles, fashion choices, infertility, and pregnancy are just some of them. While each of these topics is well-established, Kannen's synthesis offers readers a compelling and pedagogically valuable framework for both research and teaching.

A striking feature of the book is its engagement with visual representation. The inclusion of Damian Mellin's illustrations is particularly noteworthy. These images on the opening page of each chapter, coupled with the artist's commentary, are carefully crafted to avoid overly prescriptive depictions. They invite readers to creatively engage with imagined body transformation without reducing individuals' stories to fixed stereotypical imagery.

As a medical anthropologist studying gendered embodiment, I found this book particularly intriguing. My research has examined the role of bodily transformations in various contexts, from women exiting sex work to individuals undergoing weight loss surgery. Dramatic alterations initially shaped my perspective on bodily transformation. However, one of Kannen's major strengths is her attention to the more subtle, often overlooked transformations that occur in everyday life and are perceived as ordinary (such as hairstyle, pregnancy, or the mere reflection of one's racialised embodiment). By situating these alongside more pronounced bodily modifications, she challenges conventional understandings of transformation and advances our interpretations of the changing body.

Kannen's approach shifts the conversation away from classical body-modification scholarship, often preoccupied with spectacular transformations, towards the textures of everyday embodied change, viewed through

an explicitly intersectional lens. Her study resonates with recent work such as Sassatelli and Ghigi's *Body and Gender* (2023), which demonstrates how embodiment is simultaneously naturalised and contested, and Jarrín and Pussetti's *Remaking the Human* (2021), which maps contemporary practices of bodily reshaping through hormones, prosthetics, cosmetic surgery, and lifestyle drugs.

Against this backdrop, Kannen rejects binary frameworks, foregrounding both power relations and the reclamation of stigmatised embodiments, including chronic illness, fatness, hairstyling, and racialised skin. With a clear pedagogical orientation, *Transforming Bodies* closes each chapter with key terms and questions for reflection and discussion, making it particularly useful in teaching contexts.

In the next section, I will outline three central key tensions that *Transforming Bodies* engages with as it navigates the spaces between them: Scholarly and popular audiences, Nuanced and extreme transformations, and Beyond binaries.

SCHOLARLY AND POPULAR AUDIENCES

Kannen's writing is remarkably fluent and engaging, creating an almost intimate reading experience. She employs a direct and conversational tone, frequently addressing the reader as 'you' and maintaining this approach throughout the text. This stylistic choice enhances accessibility to a broad audience, extending beyond academia to anyone interested in gender, embodiment, and transformation in contemporary North American societies (Canada and the USA) and fosters a strong sense of connection between the author and the reader.

The opening chapter, 'Bodies,' outlines key decisions regarding the book's structure and ethical foundation. Kannen shares how she issued a public call on X (Twitter) for participants willing to discuss significant bodily changes. Each session began with a detailed consent form, and participants chose whether to appear under their own names or pseudonyms. Kannen provides a brief biography for each, allowing readers to understand the context behind every story. By focusing on personal narratives and by explicitly positioning herself as a white, cisgender, settler, able-bodied, tall woman, she demonstrates feminist theory and methodologies: acknowledging the researcher's experiences of power and the ways they shape meanings and interpretations. She emphasises the importance of consent and transparency, making it clear that ethics are at the foundation of the project.

Kannen takes great care in deconstructing key terms in a concise and accessible manner. For instance, in Chapter Two (Intersections), she explores the intersection of gender, race, sexuality, and queerness, examining their interrelationships. Each chapter concludes with a list of key terms, such as 'Indigenous people(s)', 'sex', 'sexuality', 'Oppression', and 'normal,' and offers further questions for discussion.

Theoretically, the book situates itself at the crossroads of multidisciplinary conversations, including decolonial critiques of race, feminist and queer studies, fat studies, disability studies, and foundational work on stigma. The narratives integrate monumental authors such as Butler, Goffman, and Orbach, with writings that move beyond academic texts, such as Aubry Gordon's 'What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat' and 'The Body is Not an Apology' by Sonya Renee Taylor. This incorporation ensures that the book remains approachable to readers with varying levels of familiarity with academic literature. Yet Kannen is less concerned with producing new explicit theoretical claims. Instead, she makes the body-studies texts usable and compelling for students. Based on her rich teaching experience, she addresses a pedagogical gap: instead of introducing students to materials that separate discussions on gender, race, or extreme body modification, she braids these strands (and others) together through fluent discussion and vivid storytelling.

NUANCED AND EXTREME TRANSFORMATIONS

One of the book's strengths lies in its broad approach to embodiment, drawing from scholarship in race, gender, queer studies, disability and fat studies, ageing, and more. Rather than delving deeply into each phenomenon, it highlights the value of examining them collectively, revealing the shared mechanisms of diet culture, the beauty industry, and intersecting racial and gender oppressions that shape how we experience our bodies.

One of the most compelling aspects of *Transforming Bodies* is its expansive approach to bodily change. Kannen moves beyond dramatic physical alterations, such as surgeries, to consider subtle, everyday transformations. By juxtaposing major bodily modifications with the nearly imperceptible shifts of daily life, she challenges conventional understandings of transformation, offering a more fluid and dynamic perspective on the concept of embodiment.

Such a sensitive deconstruction appears when the author talks about her own transformation and realisation of race:

'My race was not talked about in spaces primarily populated by white people. When I left the city and moved to Toronto, a space full of diverse bodies and experiences, my body became clearer to me. (31)'

This reflection is essential for recognising privilege and inequality and can resonate powerfully with readers as they navigate their identities in various contexts.

Similar gentle complexity is evident in Kannen's discussion of body size. In Chapter 3 (Shapes), the author moves beyond mainstream discussions of diet culture and weight loss pressures, introducing narratives that highlight the social reception of thinness. For instance, one interlocutor, Hila, reflects on how her body affects others:

"I realised that my small body is provoking people to feel shame around food choices and soda consumption. And so, my presence became this kind of policing of other people's bodies. (41)"

Such a nuanced and sensitive approach to body size is another example of in-depth discussion that illustrates how bodily presence shapes social interactions.

By juxtaposing narratives of invisible disabilities (such as ADHD and anxiety) with more profound impairments (such as leukaemia and ACL injuries), Kannen challenges binary understandings of ability and disability. In chapter 4 (Ages and Dis/Abilities), she argues that when it comes to 'life interrupted' by disability, we do not have to reduce the experience to a life-versus-death binary for it to be meaningful. This 'life interrupted' framing effectively conveys how even seemingly minor bodily changes can be deeply transformative.

BEYOND BINARIES

Kannen highlights how gender, structural constraints, and social norms intersect and shape embodied experiences by centring marginalised voices (Liu, 2020; Yang & Henderson, 2024). Yet much of the book brings meaningful examples of reclaiming, acceptance, and subversion.

In Chapter 4 (Ages and Dis/Abilities), Audrey, a 64-year-old woman who is very fit and whose physical appearance challenges societal expectations of aging, powerfully illustrates her agency and resistance to bodily norms.

Haz, in their 40s, talked about getting acquainted with body positivity and fat liberation, stating:

"Okay, your body's getting bigger. Maybe it's because you're eating a little bit better. Maybe it's because your body is just changing. And either way, that's okay. (44)"

Others, such as Jules and Laura, continue these messages, stating they love the 'misfitting parts' of their bodies.

Chapter 5 (Names) engages with (re)naming, for instance, after colonial histories of erasure and displacement that resulted in the erasure of Indigenous and immigrant identities. Trans people, as well as heterosexual women, grapple with their names in different ways. This chapter explores the politics of pronouns and the complex relationships between names, patriarchy, and the body. Since names are 'historical signs of gender' (75), changing names reclaims agency and embodies history and family.

Chapter 6 (Performances) delves even deeper into richness and nuanced bodily changes. The appearances and meanings of top surgery, tattoos, hair, and drag performances raise more profound questions regarding authenticity and everyday transformations. Jules says:

"Doing drag gives you an interesting perspective on what is real or authentic. I literally transform every day, but doesn't everyone? (85)"

The politics of hair, plus-size fashion, and the inner struggles to resist them are enlightening in their depiction of the subversion of everyday oppressions. The last chapter, (Bodies Transform) continues this path, depicting a strong embrace of fluidity and in-betweenness of bodies and identities. Overall, these chapters present bold narratives of hope, body liberation, resistance, and playfulness, all of which are meaningful to the framework of transformation, while also acknowledging power and oppression.

CONCLUSIONS

Transforming Bodies makes a significant contribution to the study of gender, embodiment, and transformation, offering a rich, accessible, and fresh exploration of these themes. Kannen's engaging writing style and careful attention to extreme and subtle bodily changes make this book a valuable resource for scholars and non-academic readers.

Kannen's approach, which prioritises depth over breadth, is characteristic of qualitative research. However, for readers less familiar with this methodology, a more explicit discussion of sample size and its implications would have been helpful, particularly in illustrating how small-scale, in-depth narratives can contribute to a broader understanding of society. Additional clarity around narrative choices and recruitment methods would also have strengthened the methodological framework. For instance, Kannen's deliberate focus on the voices of women, trans, and non-binary participants aligns with her aim to foreground the lived experiences of marginalised communities. At the same time, her use of social media for recruitment likely influenced the participant pool in terms of access to technology, which may correlate with factors such as socioeconomic class and age. A more critical reflection on these recruitment strategies and their impact on representation would have deepened the book's engagement with issues of power and inclusion. Furthermore, Kannen does not specify whether interviews

were held in person, online, or by phone; face-to-face conversations yield added nuance, and I wonder what additional insights and reflection on this issue might have produced.

While I appreciate the book's comprehensive approach, I have one reservation regarding the book's oversight of religious practices of embodiment, such as revealing or concealing the body as well as ceremonial expressions. While no single book can cover all aspects of bodily change, engaging with some of these examples could have broadened the scope and added depth to the analysis.

It is challenging to categorise this text within other books: it is neither the typical introductory handbook, which primarily exemplifies basic terms and theories, nor standard academic research that introduces novel theoretical concepts. It is safe to say that it does both at the same time, holding a necessary, fresh, and accessible deconstruction and rebuilding of contemporary conversations on body transformation, weaving canonical and contemporary theory, fascinating personal narratives, and insightful analytical frameworks.

The result is an approachable yet theoretically rich synthesis that enables readers to navigate body and embodiment studies, suitable for both undergraduate and graduate students, as well as well-read scholars.

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