
REVIEWS

J. H. Liu, T. McCreanor, T. McIntosh, and T. Teaiwa, eds., *New Zealand Identities: Departures and Destinations*. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2005. Pp. 304.

Reviewed by Melani Anae, University of Auckland

THE EDITORS OF THIS VOLUME state that it “seeks to engage thinking from a variety of disciplines in dialogue around the topics of national and ethnic identities in New Zealand. We wanted to produce an interconnected series of conversations, each with its own voice reflecting not only discipline-specific knowledge and values, but also a deep sense of commitment to sharing this understanding with others. It is hoped that readers will reflect upon the different positions and sources of knowing” (11).

I found most of the articles, which had been collected from submissions calling for papers in 2004, individually informative and often provocative in not only challenging conventional notions about identity at the individual, group, and national levels, but also collectively, their “agree to disagree” approach regarding disciplinary approaches, positions, styles, and pitch. An experimental approach indeed, as the last chapter, “100% Pure Conjecture: Accounts of Our Future State(s),” illustrates (Frame, Molisa, Taylor, Toia, Liu Shueng). But then, this obviously was the intention of the editors—that this book would mirror the flux in identity positioning, vacillations, hybridity and diverse perspectives mirrored in both the title and content matter of papers regarding the subject matter, New Zealand identities, in order “to reach an appreciation of identity as a question rather than a statement, a point of departure rather than a destination” (15). And on this the editors have succeeded.

An informative and useful preface and introduction that theorizes the dynamics of identity construction is followed by 15 chapters by both individuals (10) and groups (5) of contributors, and ends with a short but excellent afterword by the race relations commissioner that provides an apt summary for the whole volume: "There are signs of the fluidity of ethnic identity, and the evolution of new identities. There is a recognition that identity is a means of defending and contesting existing power relationships, and of perpetuating or challenging exclusion" (292).

The contributors come from a variety of ethnicities and disciplines, although both are relatively "balanced" in that of the 23 authors, there are 11 immigrants from Britain, China, the United States, and Malaysia, who are now naturalized New Zealanders or permanent residents, and 12 authors born in New Zealand; and 12 of European stock, 3 Maori, 3 Pacific Islanders, and 5 Asian. As the editors state, "an unlikely assortment of folk, from disciplines of anthropology (Levine, Mallon), Asian studies (Ip, Pang), cultural geography (Barclay), demography (Zodkegar), environmental studies, history (Byrnes, McGie), Maori studies (Borrell), Pacific studies (Teaiwa), political science and international relations (Capie), psychology (McCreanor, Liu, Ward, Lin), religious studies (Morris), sociology (Pearson, McIntosh), and a team from Landcare Research Ltd. (Frame, Molisa, Taylor, Toia, Liu Shueng)."

All articles address the issue of New Zealand identities and the three major themes—that identities are dynamic and multilayered; that identities are socially constructed; and that identities carry ideology (Pearson, Levine, Barclay, Teaiwa/Mallon, McCreanor, Byrnes and Zodkegar). And most directly addressed the macropolitics (Liu, Morris, Capie/McGhie) and micropolitics of group-based identities (Ward/Lin, Borrell, McIntosh, Ip/Pang).

What are New Zealand identities? A big ask and a mighty effort. But for this reader the volume was not saying anything that those of us born and bred in New Zealand but with different ethnicities didn't know already. What this volume lacked was more perspectives on the politics of identity and transnational identities. More contributions from Maori and Pacific contributors would not have gone amiss, especially with regard to tangata whenua status of the former and historical and economic connections between New Zealand and the South Pacific regarding the latter. A chapter or two focusing on inter/intra ethnicity and a look at the saliency of primordial (read emotional) versus circumstantialist underpinnings of ethnicity would have revealed and exposed the inter/intra ethnic identity nuances involved in New Zealand identities, and thus highlight the need for more in-depth critical analysis of

the salience of ethnic identity in New Zealand today (Anae 1998a). Moreover, the insights to be gleaned from Merton's status sets and Kopytoff's immanent/circumstantial existential identities (both cited in Anae 1998b) would have helped us understand why some individual/group social identities are more important than others, thereby providing some sense of committed direction towards the finality, or the existence of unchanging or secured identities for some individuals and groups (Anae 1998a).

As Tapu Misa points out (*NZ Herald*, 8 March 2006), "History is full of examples of ethnic groups who have been named, and defined by contrasting others. . . . Why does identity matter? Why does so much of contemporary politics converge on identity?"

There is never going to be a commonly shared understanding of a static, unitary "inclusive national identity" among all New Zealanders. As shown in this volume, this will fluctuate according to context and over space and time. But we must be wary of labels and processes regarding imagined identities that will subjugate tangata whenua and other ethnic minority groups in this process. What I am reminded of when reading the collection of essays in this book is Sahlins' notion of "structural work" or the structural-cum-symbolic amplification of minor differences (Sahlins 2005). "What we have is structural relays of various sorts endowing local parties with collective identities and the opposing collectives with local or interpersonal sentiments. In the occurrence, the small-scale struggles (particularistic interests) are transformed into abstract universalistic ideals and irreconcilable causes-to-die-for, their outcome depending now on the larger correlation of forces. This is how small-scale, interpersonal or factional disputes are turned into large-scale struggles between nations, kingdoms or their totalized like—thus making macro histories out of micro histories and vice versa" (Sahlins 2005).

Finally, let me say that despite my reservations, the strength of this book is that it most definitely makes us think through identity issues in New Zealand, and represents an important start in illustrating that respect for the value or mana of each person and group in our society and respect for our diversity rather than a fear of diversity can go a long way in our understanding of why a unitary national identity for any nation-state is extremely and necessarily problematic.

References

Anae, M.

- 1998a Fofoaivaese: NZ-born Samoan Identity Journeys. PhD dissertation, Department of Anthropology. University of Auckland.

1998b Inside Out: Methodological Issues on Being a “Native” Researcher, *Pacific Health Dialog: Journal of Community Health and Clinical Medicine for the Pacific* 5 (2): 273–279.

Sahlins, M.

2005 Structural Work: How Microhistories Become Macrohistories and Vice Versa. *Anthropological Theory* 5 (1): 5–30.