

## **Book Review**

**Title:** *Replaceable You: Engineering the Body in Postwar America*

**Author:** David Serlin

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**Reviewer:** Steven E. Brown

David Serlin gives nuance to the 1940s and 50s in this book about modern medicine and social change and perception in the United States. Serlin's primary chapters utilize one aspect of medicine and a primary protagonist to focus on broader changes during this period.

Serlin's chapters are progressively more risqué. He begins with a veteran of World War II and describes how the development of a hand prosthetic is meant to heal both the soldier's physical wounds, and integrate him into his proper social milieu. This theme that recurs throughout the book. He follows this chapter with a description of a group of women known as the Hiroshima Maidens. These Japanese victims of the American atomic bomb attack on Hiroshima traveled to the United States to undergo new innovations in plastic surgery to try to regain their place in Japanese society. From here, Serlin moves into two figures, who in some ways, are radically different: Gladys Bentley, and Christine Jorgensen. Bentley was a notorious lesbian performer at the height of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s who claimed to become a heterosexual woman with the treatment of estrogen therapy in the 1950s. Jorgensen was an ex-soldier who became the first well-known male to female transsexual in the U.S. Serlin's analysis of Bentley and hormone replacement therapy covers a lot of territory, including a complex life that seems to have been mostly oversimplified in previous depictions. With Jorgensen there seems to be more of a focus on her public persona than the complexities of her life.

Serlin ends with a concluding chapter describing how artist Andy Warhol fits into this picture. The book makes the point that:

“...medical procedures and technologies enabled individuals to emerge victoriously from the closets of shame and pathology into which they were typically forced, and provided new narrative possibilities heretofore unanticipated by the vast majority of Americans” (161).

A person with a disability reading this work might conclude that not much has changed over the years. Medical miracles are still, as they were then, being touted as cures for all kinds of social ills. Sometimes they seemed to work; sometimes they did not. Serlin's subjects found, as have many of us, that there is a difference between perceived medical healing and social acceptance. Which leaves all of us wondering why in some cases, difference is so heralded, and in others, so reviled?