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Transnational Discourses on Gender Variance

JC Acosta

Gender could be thought of as one of the easiest things in the world to do. Most people do gender everyday without stopping to think about it. At the same time, talking about gender is one of the hardest things for people to do. While gender is preformed in a public way, thinking about gender takes people into a private space. It is in this duality that gender is able to have a fluid and multilayered place in a person's identity. Gender becomes in a way the public consciousness and performance of meanings assigned to one or more gendered categories (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender presentation is the individual person's response and reaction to the larger gender ideology which informs everyone in society about which behaviors, dress, and attitudes fit into one of the gender categories, almost always corresponding to a biological sex (Butler, 1990; Lorber, 1994).

Most people have congruence between their sex, gender presentation, and their internal sense of gender identity. Most recently the category of cisgender or "gender normals" has been created to describe these individuals as juxtaposed with transgender, which describes any individual who does not identify in some way with the accepted or hegemonic gender ideology (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). In many ways transgender has become a catch-all term comprising a diverse group of individuals, many of whom reject the transgender label, viewing it as part of the same system they view as oppressive. But the "trans" identity firmly remains a space claimed by people outside of the hegemonic gender prescriptions however they define them.

As individuals negotiate these larger categories of identity in society, it is difficult to avoid the influence the media plays in prescribing gender roles. Modern mass media

occupies a position where the messages millions receive are whichever images the network executives choose to portray. Early in the history of mass media, people discovered that media could be used as a tool to communicate values. At its worst, the mass media has been a vehicle for propaganda. Many of the formal mechanisms that promote propaganda have been dismantled, but the informal structures influencing social consciousness continue to inform the public. This isn't to say that movie studio executives are dictating exactly how people should behave; however, they are through TV, cinema, and advertisements, creating symbols and role models for each person to identify with, which sets a standard or expectation for behavior. When a system of surveillance and control causes people to act in certain ways, it is called panopticism (Foucault, 1977). For trans identified people, this comes as a balancing act between the normalized behaviors of cisgendered people and the constructed images of trans identities.

Almost everyone portrayed in TV shows or in movies is a cisgender person. Where this becomes problematic is when individuals who do not identify with the cisgendered space of identity are left out. This is the process of symbolic annihilation because as the media creates a picture of society, the people who are not in line with that picture lose their place in the social construction of society (Giovanelli & Ostertag, 2009). Power becomes vitally important in the social construction of society as those with it have the ability to attach value to difference (Johnson, 2006). Marginalized groups like transgender people lose voice or their voices become distortions through the dominant group's lens.

What portrayals do appear fall into harmful tropes which reinforce stereotypes about transgender folks. Many tropes aimed at gender nonconformity play to misconceptions of transgender women but as more trans men have become visible, the messages have changed to reflect the same sentiments on to them as well. Julia Serano (2007) discusses two of these tropes in her book, *Whipping Girl*. The first is the “pathetic,” an individual who is attempting to challenge the notions of gender presentation but fails in an obvious way. The very muscular “manly” man in a pink tutu exemplifies this trope. Where there would be nothing wrong with that person wearing anything he or she wanted, what this image creates is the idea that gender is fixed and cannot be challenged. On first glance the onlooker knows that the character is most decisively masculine. The pink tutu is the invocation of a strikingly feminine object. This translates to any person who the observer can tell embodies a sexed body somehow not matching his or her appearance or behavior. Within the gender system in America, men have an embodied power that women do not (Bornstein, 1998; Johnson, 2006). The trope of the pathetic takes power away from the man by putting the feminine identified object or behavior triggering the entrenched notion of powerless women. Their juxtaposition is intentional to reinforce that men are men and should conduct themselves as men; any violation of that norm is absurd.

The few individuals able to escape the pathetic trope many times fall into the other trope discussed in Serano’s (2007) book, the “deceiver.” Where the pathetic had no power, the deceiver is consciously using his or her power in order to lure and corrupt hapless normal people, mainly heterosexual men, who would be converted to homosexuality. Deceivers represent an embodiment of the dangerous nature of any

challenge to the gender system. They are almost always men masquerading as women for some less than respectable purpose. In the 1993 comedy *Mrs. Doubtfire*, for example, a man assumes the identity of an elderly English woman to circumvent a custody battle with his ex-wife. As this and other examples of the deceiver trope play out in cinema, characters go through a process on screen to conceal their sex from the other characters for any number of reasons. Films *Some Like It Hot* (1958), *Work it* (2011), and *Yentl* (1983) all exemplify this deceiver trope. Portrayals inevitably lead to comedic scenes where characters must juggle situations and maintain their disguise. Within this juggle, the result is always the same: someone, usually a man, discovers the character's "true identity" and exposes this to the community. Afterward, they must remain in their "true" sex to face their just punishment. What few examples of non comedic deceivers exist are focused on people who choose to identify as trans or gender nonconforming.

Unfortunately, these are usually based on true stories where someone is killed, usually the trans individual, such as *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *The Crying Game* (1992) and *A Soldier's Girl* (2003), which all depict tragic outcomes as a result of male to female or female to male gender transgressions.

Using Serano's (2007) work, both the deceiver and the pathetic limit what is known about the character's internal sense of self. In an evolving world, the media is slowly beginning to address increasing numbers of trans identified people. Here, the media response has been to create tropes for them that focus on the internal sense of gender identity. In this new media climate, the old tropes still continue to be reproduced along side new ones. For example, the sociopath/psychopath is an individual who has some fundamental flaw that creates the need to act in a gender non conforming way. This

character behaves in ways designed to suggest that only a psychological illness would create the desire to want to occupy a trans space. Most visible in this category is the character Buffalo Bill from *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), who desires to become a woman by murdering women and wearing their skin. When Buffalo Bill “does” his gender, he becomes less of a person. Butler (2004) comments on everyday interactions involving gender where the attitudes and norms that inform the construction of Buffalo Bill as a representative figure of trans people causes an extension to his trans character that both repulses and projects onto trans people as a whole. This character is designed in such a disturbing way that nothing about Bill is redeeming. Although the film doesn’t suggest that all trans people are deranged killers, the trans aspect of his identity is intertwined with his dangerous mental condition.

As juxtaposition to the older messages about trans folk is the new space of reality TV and the docudrama. In these more recent spaces, studios have set out to capture the “real” story of this fringe group of people. At the same time that these programs are marketed as documentaries from the perspective to of trans people, the capitalist realities of the entertainment industry remain the underlying factor driving what is depicted and what is left out. As such, the messages that would be the accurate representation of the trans experience have a sensational component and a strong reinforcement of gender ideologies. Trans women are universally shown in dresses, applying makeup, or engaging in some behavior that communicates that they are feminine women. What does appear on screen that might suggest otherwise is the medical procedures that reaffirm a distinct barrier between men and women. Taken from earlier discourses on sexuality, anyone who wishes to transgress social barriers can be associated with a medical “fix,” but

problematically, the docudrama pathologizes the trans identity as a medical problem with a cure (Foucault, 1978).

In the MTV series *True Life*, an episode, “I’m Changing My Sex” (2009), focused on trans youth, attempting to document both a trans woman and a trans man’s stories. Underneath the camera’s following the two and doing spot interviews with their friends or families is the missing piece of gender nonconformity. Both of the young people fit into the gender spaces assigned to the sex they are becoming. Although problematizing any individual’s identity or choices is completely unfair, when these examples come to represent the only portrayals of trans narratives, they transform into a mechanism of oppression. The social construction of trans spaces uses media-influenced ideas as its foundation, leaving any deviation from that construct as extensions of the other media tropes. In this sense, one is allowed to be trans identified so long as it fits into the gender system. If not, then they must be a pathetic, a deceiver, or a sociopath.

Although this discussion paints a rather bleak picture for positive representations of trans folks in the mass media, there are healthy depictions of trans identities in foreign films and TV, which are slowly making their way into the American consciousness. *Ma Vie en Rose* (1997), a French language film, directly addressed a complex perspective on gender nonconformity with a trans identified child named Ludovic. Ludovic’s story stands apart from other more home grown attempts at positive trans portrayals as it depicts the issues encountered during the transition process of acceptance. Most importantly, the producers of the film intend for the audience to identify with Ludovic as another child growing into a complicated world. The film challenges the gender system, but in a way that provokes the audience to focus on the human dignity within Ludovic.

Another French language film, *Tomboy* (2011), begs the audience to consider the tomboy identity as a socially constructed space with rules regardless of the feelings of the young woman claiming that identity. Where contemporary notions of acceptable gender presentation for females give a wider range than that for males, the gender system only allows for a temporary freedom for young girls to be tomboys. Inherent in this space is the need to clearly mark that individual as female but in the tomboy space as well as the temporary nature of the space. Young women are expected to grow out of the tomboy identity when the people around them, usually family, deem tomboy rejection necessary as part of girl peer bonding. The film inspires a discourse on that construction by conveying a young person in the tomboy space as a multidimensional human being. The tomboy identity doesn't define them but remains integral to their sense of self.

Both *Ma Vie en Rose* (1997) and *Tomboy* (2011) question notions of the social construction of gender with a perspective in gender nonconformity and performance as an extension of self. This becomes an important distinction within transgender discourses as they critique the gender system allowing for spaces of identity in a larger spectrum (Bornstein 1998, Butler 2004). Media narratives incorporating the formalized structures of "transition," such as the docu-drama, *South Park's* episode 901, "Mr. Garrison's Fancy New Vagina" (2005), and *Family Guy's* episode 818, "Quagmire's Dad" (2010), trivialize identity while making transition from one gender to another to be a quick and frivolous process. A Japanese TV show challenges these messages by incorporating the social and medical aspects of transition into the main plot of the show, *Hourou Musuko* "Wandering Son" (2011), which follows the difficult journey of Nitori Shuichi, a young trans woman undergoing the initial stages of transition and negotiating this transgender

identity while in middle school. Although a fictional account, this ties in many of the realities facing “trans” identified young people: members of his family disapprove, his school has adheres to rigid gender scripts, and ze is negotiating his desires for a relationship with a classmate, all while learning more about his identity within society. While this is a fictionalized account, the attention to a holistic experience of trans identity communicates a larger message about the multidimensional nature of transition and of any individual on the whole.

The constructions of society dictated by the mass media cannot be categorized as wholly problematic, but the representation of groups comes through the filter of norms and values media packages for consumption. Transgender people are multidimensional and deserve to have a constructed narrative that reflects their inherent humanity. As the current gender order becomes more entrenched in the mass media, the identities of trans identified people will be distanced further from the norm. However, some smaller transnational discourses are appearing and, should they reach American viewers, have the potential to open up a critical dialogue on the values espoused in modern mass media. The scholarship on these issues, especially Judith Butler (1997), challenges the public to reexamine the construction of gender and realize that real people live in a world of fluidity where identity is truly what one makes of it.

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