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(RE)BORN THIS WAY

A Thesis

Presented in

Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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BY

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On December 1, 1952 American newspapers exploded with the story of a former American GI by the name of George Jorgenson becoming a woman under the care of European doctors. The story of the renamed Christine Jorgenson became a sensationalized hit with American readers, even proving more popular for some newspapers than the execution of the accused atomic spies, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg.¹ Her life was proof of the marvel that modern medicine had become in the post-World War II era. Jorgenson found that she had transformed into not only a woman, but also a celebrity.² Her photogenic and articulate nature set the stage for her life as the subject of enduring public interest.³ However, the initial acclaim and curiosity that assisted her rise to stardom would not endure as qualifiers around the state of being a woman came into contention.⁴ A public, once so eager to receive Jorgenson as an example of man's triumph over science, subsequently came judge her identity, and in many ways her existence, as fraudulent when the voice of medical authorities intervened once again.⁵ Questions about Jorgenson's genital surgery led to the discovery that Jorgenson did not,

¹ Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 66. Given that the weight of the Rosenberg's trial and subsequent execution carries such significance in the construction of America's Cold War history, Jorgenson's life and public importance in the construction of America's politics of patriotism and conformity.

² *Ibid.*, 51- 52.

³ *Ibid.*, 66. Jorgenson's claims to femininity were often articulated by newspapers through her conventionally understood feminine beauty. Her intentional alignment with the so-called bombshell beauty standards of the post war period exemplifies her strategic and presentation of her gender.

⁴ David Serlin, *Replaceable You: Engineering the Body in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 184. Four months after her public debut, Jorgenson's authenticity as a woman came under contest as newspapers performed an about face in their rhetoric. Jorgenson was no longer a legitimate woman in the eyes of the American public. Instead, she was a perceived to be a failed man.

⁵ Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 61. It became public knowledge that Jorgenson lacked female reproductive organs and, as of 1953, had yet to undergo full genital reconstruction required for penetrative intercourse. This knowledge resulted in the rhetoric that perceived Jorgenson to be a disgraced and willfully castrated man.

nor had she ever, possessed female reproductive organs.⁶ America's experience with distrust towards its first publicly open transwoman set tone for the way it would regard generations of trans-identified individuals to follow.

Gender transgressive bodies have proven to be a battleground for fighting over meanings of gender authenticity and identity in American culture. The ways in which they have been represented and received through popular media has, as can be seen with Jorgenson's story, a long precedence of comparison to a cisgender normative standard. Against such a standard trans identities are framed as at best, *almost* adequate but still *lacking*, and at worst, *deceptive*.⁷ Even in contemporary culture, trans bodies are constantly guarding against accusations of fraudulence. The current most successful and medically supported narrative is the "wrong body narrative." This narrative constructs a transgender individual's gender experience as at odds with their biological sex.⁸

The "wrong body" narrative appeals to a solution-based climate. The concept of treatment works now to bring a perceived unconventional body closer to conventional standards; an act that David Serlin argues allowed the bodies in question to "express an American identity in a more palatable way."⁹ This process, Serlin argues, fit a uniquely American post-World War II cultural climate that called for a marriage of "personal

⁶ Ibid., 72. Given that Jorgensen was not medically classified as intersexed, her claim to her identity as a woman was perceived as illegitimate. The presence of any biological markers (primarily the presence of any female reproductive traits) of female sex were perceived as a way to access womanhood if the individual in question possessed a body that caused confusion around sex-identification. For more on the category of intersex, see Susan Preves, *Intersex and Identity: The Contested Self* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

⁷ For more on the "deceptive transsexual" trope, see Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007).

⁸ The alignment of gender identity to an individual's sex at birth is known as the experience of being cisgender.

⁹ Serlin, *Replaceable You*, 11.

possibility and public responsibility.”¹⁰ The body is brought into a space in which it can more coherently express its Americanness because it is seen as closer to a supposed normal. Thus, upholding a cultural coherence about masculinity and femininity and the bodies these traits rightfully belong to.

How are the wrong bodies identified in the first place? A great deal of this is done through the actions the transgender-identified individuals partake in and the objects (particularly the clothes) that the individuals come to desire. The gender of a child is often initially inferred “from their genital sex in infancy and [we] subsequently interpret their behaviors as ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine.’ As children age, the reverse process occurs. Because we are unfamiliar with a child’s genital makeup, we infer a child’s sex from its behavior...”¹¹ Cisnormative logic relies on the children who were sexed as female behaving as feminine. Wrong body narratives rely on disrupting this logic. Often an individual’s gravitation towards objects and clothing that are gendered as being masculine or feminine (and perhaps more importantly as opposite of what a cisnormative standard would expect them to desire) is held up as a moment of truth, it becomes a sort of “tell” that works to convey what I term as *authentic internal gender*. It is internal because it cannot be read through any physical marker and it is allowed authenticity because it promotes a binary understanding of masculinity as belonging solely to men and femininity as belonging solely to women.

This logic occurs alongside a resistance to dominating frameworks that demand congruence between sex and gender. The consistent pull towards masculine or feminine when presented as indicating authentic internal gender reinforces dominating ideas of

¹⁰ Ibid., 1.

¹¹ Susan Preves, *Intersex and Identity: The Contested Self* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 17.

what behaviors belong to men and women while making space for bodies previously excluded from these identities.

The idea of being a gender instead of doing gender¹² works to enforce a reimagined essentialist stance on gender. This reimagining requires a certain amount of willingness to understand that the truth of gender is not couched in sex, but rather read through one's affiliation towards external signifiers that work to indicate the truth of internal authentic gender. This is a part of the earlier mentioned process of inferring sex through behavior. Within reimagined gender essentialism, interpreting an individual's inclinations towards objects and activities with socially constructed gendered meanings reveals internal authentic gender, rather than assigned sex.

Through medical technologies, bodies have the potential to become malleable, however understandings of gender continue to trend towards inflexibility where the portrayal of trans narratives are concerned. The participants are described in terms of their previous and continuing tendency to gravitate towards objects or activities that society has placed a gendered value on. Their early-established desire for aligning themselves with the *things* that reflect their understanding of self is regarded as an early form of indication of their internal authentic gender. So if gender is being read through an individual's actions and claims, the doing of gender still must correspond to binary assertions of gender.

¹² Judith Lorber, *Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 298. Lorber builds upon the idea that gender is constructed through social markers and actions rather than indicated by any sort of physical marker. The performance of gender is another way to consider the idea of gender as constructed rather than essential. For more on the performance of gender see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

Judith Lorber acknowledged that the “goal of many transgendered people is to ‘pass’ as a ‘normal’ gendered person, a goal that is necessary for solving problems of daily life in their desired gender, but not one that disrupts the gendered order.”¹³ Problematic language aside,¹⁴ it must be said that there is nothing wrong with this perspective. This perspective strives towards a safer existence in a hostile hetero and cisnormative environment that prefers legibility within the binary system. To read gender identity as the site of truth allows entrance into the existing gender system for some, but runs the risk of reinforcing the notion that experience of self should dictate outward expression. The problem is that there are few, if any alternatives of experience available in current popular media which reflects the limited variety of trans experience in popular culture as a whole. The result of promoting this narrow understanding of gender is that it does very little to challenge notions of what masculinity and femininity can look like in a variety of bodies. Instead, through the intervention of medicalization bodies become assignable, fixed (somewhat) from their deviance as they are reinterpreted to reproduce the visible standards of how bodies are to express gender and what genders they are to express.¹⁵

A queer reading of the possibilities of gender would seek to deconstruct the binary of masculine and feminine and their supposed corresponding bodies. It works to analyze the ways in which normative assumptions about how bodies are to conduct themselves inevitably privilege the gender order rather than disrupt it. The function of

¹³ Ibid., 295.

¹⁴ Due to the dominant ways in which we think of, and talk about, gender, attempts to discuss the way in which we construct trans identity can have the tendency to fall back on normative language that effectively privileges cisgender identity even as we attempt theorizing about said privilege.

¹⁵ Thus returning and upholding the idea of masculinity is the exclusive property of men and femininity is the exclusive property of women.

queer, at least in this project, is the resistance of multiple forms of normativity that would otherwise seek to uphold heteronormativity and cisnormativity as naturally occurring instead of systemically privileging.

In the last decade the amount and sheer availability of material documenting the experience of transgender lives has grown. In this thesis, *(Re)Born This Way*, I work to analyze the way in which the “wrong body” narrative has been (almost exclusively) promoted in popular media. In analyzing three televised documentaries, 20/20’s *My Secret Self: A Story of Transgender Children*, MSNBC’s *Born in the Wrong Body: All in the Family*, and OWN’s *Becoming Chaz*, I pay close attention to the both the trans narratives that are told and the ways in which rhetoric is used to tell these stories. I intentionally utilize the documentary format as documentaries are “*believed* to play a central cultural role in representing minority view points and having serious historical or social significance...”¹⁶ In operating within this logic, there is an assumption that a great deal of the audience will have had little personal experience with transgender individuals and communities. Television as an enormously accessible facilitator of education and entertainment¹⁷ magnifies the potential reach of these documentaries. Thus the documentary holds the possibility of being the entry point into discussions around transgender identity for an inexperienced and uninformed audience.

Documentaries, both as films and those of the made-for-television variety, purport to offer an insider perspective into a marginalized community that much of mainstream society has little experience with. The benefit of these stories is the visibility and

¹⁶ Susan Murray, “‘I Think We Need a New Name for It’: The Meeting of Documentary and Reality TV,” in *Reality TV: Remaking TV Culture*, ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 43.

¹⁷ Jostein Gripsrud, introduction to *Television As Common Knowledge*, ed. Jostein Gripsrud (New York: Routledge, 1999), 2.

potential for transgender communities to explain themselves and their identities to confront and hopefully stem the social stigma that often accompanies their experiences. However, the full-breadth and range of lived realities of trans lives is left behind for an easily packaged and sold narrative of being in the “wrong body.” proves easily packaged and disseminated to a larger public due to the society’s struggle to understand how to talk to and about transgender people as their bodies present a site of confusion and threaten what normative notions of gender authenticity imply.

Trans children occupy an interesting position in this struggle. Their adamant demands to live their lives gendered as they see fit pushes back on the coinciding heteronormative and cisnormative expectations placed on their bodies and their futures. The resistance presented by trans children reveals the value that is invested in maintaining heteronormativity and cisnormativity.¹⁸ They reveal that there is a way in which dominant culture ensures that such expectations of cisgendered status and heterosexuality persist until proven otherwise, effectively sexualizing children despite the assertion that children cannot be sexual.¹⁹

While “wrong body” narratives have opened up a space for transgender-identified people without the looming judgment of deviancy, its reliance on socially constructed and medically reinforced hierarchical systems prove to recreate the limitations that the term transgender sought to destabilize in the first place. This thesis seeks to situate the ways in which trans representation has been discussed in the media in the past and the

¹⁸ Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 8. Stockton specifically utilizes the figure of “the gay child” to construct this idea, however I argue that the dynamics translate readily to the figure of the trans child. Stockton positions the figure of “the gay child” as the lens through which we come to understand that all children are queer to varying extents. “The gay child” reveals the constructions imposed upon children about childhood by adults.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

way that popular discourse has shifted. In adapting to discussing transgender bodies and transgender lives, discussions of plain deviancy in the media have been replaced with newer medically-constructed regulations on what constitutes transgender experiences.

Regarding Trans Terminologies:

The word transgender was developed in an attempt to deploy a more inclusive term for those who experienced their identity outside of, or in direct opposition to, the male-as-masculine-and-man or the female-as-feminine-and-woman social script. The term was the beginning of an era that was marked by the community's self-determination in naming themselves.²⁰ Older popularized terms, such as transsexual, proved to be far more specific and were almost exclusively applied onto gender transgressive individuals by medical communities, thus pathologizing the term, which in turn resulted in the desire for new terminology. A focus on an individual's experience of gender as a condition rather than as a facet of their person, resulted in desires of many to reclaim the power of naming for themselves while also attempting to stem the medical institution's control on gender transgressive individuals' articulation of self.

I make the personal choice to use the term "trans"²¹ as it is a relatively recent term in use by many trans-related communities. I deploy this term when referencing a multitude of identities that may not align themselves with the term transgender. Trans is a far more recent effort at an umbrella term that allows for a multiplicity of gender

²⁰ Leslie Feinberg, "Transgender Liberation" in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen White (New York: Routledge, 2006), 206.

²¹ I decided against the use of the term trans* as there is a good deal of debate in trans-identified communities both on the internet and in more traditional social spaces as to whether the terms is transmisogynistic. The deployment of the asterisk (*) may be utilized to indicate non-binary trans-identification and may serve to further marginalize non-binary trans folk, denying them claim to the authenticity of their identities.

identities to align with concepts of non-normative gendered lives while still allowing for the space of critically important specificity. While transgender was a term that intended to accomplish the same goals in its inception, the shifting cultural understandings of the word reveal that it is regarded as a more specific location and experience in the disidentification with popular understandings of the categories of men and women.²² Often times the need for a general understanding seems to stand in the way of nuancing experience. Over-generalizing identities can serve to limit the potential for fruitful conversations regarding gender when specificity is given up for the sake of simplicity. I will deploy the term “transgender” when discussing media representations and understandings of gender transgression. As media understandings around the term seem inseparable from a medically informed narrative, my use of transgender will reflect these same attitudes as I discuss the three documentaries.

Alongside my use of different trans terminologies will be the use of pronouns. Through the course of this project I will remain as vigilant as possible in keeping my use of pronouns accurate. Pronouns hold the potential to be just as, if not more, contentious as larger identity terminology. They are deeply personal, rooted in everyday interaction (and as Robyn Wiegman points out, grammar).²³ Attending to their specificity is important to honoring the multiplicity of trans narratives that exist. For the purposes of

²² Talia Mae Bettcher, “Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Rethinking Trans Oppression and Resistance,” *Signs* 30, no. 2 (2013): 385.

²³ Robyn Wiegman, “Heteronormativity and the Desire for Gender,” *Feminist Theory* 7 (2006): 95.

this thesis I will focus primarily on the narratives of men who identify as transgender men, transmen, and Female to Male (FTM).²⁴

Media Misperceptions:

Media encounters with trans identities have become more prevalent in recent years. Trans communities often find themselves included within the LGBT acronym, despite the differing nature of challenges that are faced when sexuality is not seen as the primary reason for oppression. Trans individuals and their experiences within potential lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities vary from person to person. Transgender identity in the media is often conflated and confused with perceptions of sexuality and while J. Jack Halberstam (who was then referring to themselves and was being published under the name Judith Halberstam)²⁵ notes that many transmen have at one point in time identified as lesbians, and that a fair amount have not. Maintaining the distinctions between the two identities become difficult because of this reason.²⁶ Trans identities prove to be a site of incredible struggle not just for those looking in and trying to come to an understanding, but also for those who are coming into their own expression weighted and shaped by whatever past experiences they carry with them into their newly worked identities.

This messy inability to separate these identities lends itself to an incredibly involved complexity of self, from which it remains careless to confuse transmen as

²⁴ While the experiences of transgender women, transwomen, and femininely/female-identified individuals are as important, to fully explore their narratives is beyond the scope of this particular project.

²⁵ Here, I utilize “they” as a gender-neutral pronoun to respect Halberstam’s preference toward an unresolved gender ambiguity.

²⁶ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 150.

simply being an extension of a lesbian identity. However, it is equally shortsighted to deny that for many, coming into a trans identity has meant taking a path through identifying with a more sexuality related sphere. It can be an experience of sexuality, gender, one preceding the other, or both at the same time. All of this must be considered while accounting for the fact that trans communities come to the table with a different assortment of needs than sexual minorities might. This nuanced understanding is often neglected when broad terms such as LGBTQ are utilized and conflated interpersonally and in media representations.

Here, the importance of working towards a more nuanced understanding of identities and our relationships to them becomes imperative. Larry Gross claims that “more than just entertainment, the mass media are perhaps the most dominant and pervasive storytellers in American society. We learn how to think about the world – including about sexual minorities – from mass media.”²⁷ As the most influential source of knowledge and perspective, the media’s role in working towards a fuller understanding of trans identity takes on a critical importance for marginalized communities attempting to articulate themselves.

These distinctions having been made, some of the observations about the media and its relationship with the representation of gay and lesbian communities can be applied to the situation of transmen as their presence also creates a “presumed threat to the ‘natural’ (sexual and/or political) order of things, and thus they are inherently

²⁷ Brenda Cooper, “Boys Don’t Cry and Female Masculinity: Reclaiming a Life & Dismantling the Politics of Normative Heterosexuality,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19, no. 1 (2002): 58.

problematic and controversial for the mass media.”²⁸ While this interpretation is more specifically intended to address attitudes around sexuality as it applies to those who identify outside of the sphere of heterosexuality, it very readily translates itself to conversations about trans identities.

Transmen, in American culture, are situated within a Western heteropatriarchal legacy. Their presence and their assertion of identity push against many facets of the assumed natural and political orders of this type of social schema. As “[t]he gender order is hierarchical, which means there is consistently a higher value on masculinity than on femininity,”²⁹ there exists a specific overhanging threat of retaliation for transmen. Given the higher value placed on masculinity, transmen risk the perception of taking on a role that many deem as inconsistent and incompatible due to the absence of traditional sex markers. They are then guilty of attempting to access the privileges of maleness from an inauthentic body, even if their ascribed masculinity allows them the ability to “pass.” Gender, for all of its misunderstood conflation with biologically categorized understandings of sex, straddles a precarious position in a media that exists as a reflection of popular opinion and, often times, misinformation. Both terms are often deployed without recognition of their complexity.

Mass media is a way to disseminate knowledge about transgender communities as it reflects mainstream society’s stumbling efforts in understanding what exactly constitutes trans identities and how they differ from the category of a sexual minority. A

²⁸ Larry Gross, “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell: Lesbian and Gay People in the Media,” in *Images That Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media*, ed. Paul Martin Lester (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1996), 150.

²⁹ Kristen Schilt and Laurel Westbrook, “Doing Gender, Doing Heteronormativity,” ‘Gender Normals,’ Transgender People, and the Social Maintenance of Heterosexuality,” *Signs* 23, no. 4 (2009), 442.

part of the struggle that is experienced on both sides of trans identity is that “[t]ransgender identity is about identity experienced as problematic; the experience of being transgender problematizes the relationship of the self to the body, and the self to others. In doing so, it also problematizes issues of identity boundaries, stability and coherence.”³⁰ As society grapples with the place and purpose of transgender bodies, media reflects this struggle of understanding the transgender body as incoherent. Media reflects normative culture’s instinctual defensive reaction against the instability of gender, by portraying the body as “other.” The unexplored option of unpacking the potentially socially constructed categories of gender becomes frightening due to its assumed “natural” state.

Unfortunately, mass media’s attention tends towards the tragic. Stories regarding the murders of many trans folk have been at the center of nightly news reports for decades. Death in this set of circumstances becomes a spectacle, with the transgression of gender norms at the center, often evidenced by the literal body of the deceased. Perhaps one of the most notoriously covered cases of murder involving a masculinely gender-transgressing individual is that of Brandon Teena. Brandon Teena (born Teena Brandon) was murdered on December 31, 1993 in Nebraska. Brandon passed as a man during the time he spent in Falls City.³¹ After his perceived gender transgression was discovered, two men, who had been acquainted with Brandon previously, physically and sexually

³⁰ Eleanor MacDonald, “Critical Identities: Rethinking Feminism Through Transgender Politics,” *Atlantis* 28, no.1 (1998): 5.

³¹ Given that Brandon Teena died while identifying as a man and was subsequently murdered because of it, I make the personal choice to utilize male pronouns when referring to Brandon Teena. I do this with the acknowledgement that I have no idea what label (if any) he personally ascribed to, thus I will refrain from using the term transman when speaking about him.

assaulted him. In the aftermath of his assault Brandon had rape charges filed against his two attackers only to be murdered when they sought him out for revenge.³²

Media coverage around his death reached a fever pitch when his gender transgression was made public. Debate over his gender, in some ways, came to overshadow the fact of his murder. The discussions that were occurring at the time were often highlighted by incredible variation in the use of pronouns when referring to Brandon alongside battles fought amongst queer camps about how to claim him. It was almost as if it were a contest to win the right to call him a butch lesbian or a transman.³³ Coverage and fascination around Brandon's death stood as a particular example as to how absolutely dismantled and unprepared mass media was at attempting to discuss concepts of non-normative gender presentation.

Brandon Teena died for his gender transgression and was unable to give voice to how he wanted to be spoken about, because of a violent reassertion of "natural." The ways in which media outlets handled his story proved to be a site of trauma on their own. Annabelle Willox discusses how the United Kingdom's *The Guardian*³⁴ referred to Brandon using exclusively female pronouns when reporting on his murder. Referencing the article's author, Willox asserts that "Wheelwright's use of female pronouns when referring to Brandon's past implies that, as far as Wheelwright is concerned, the body cannot lie; the body alone defines Brandon's identity."³⁵ Brandon's body proved, at least for *The Guardian*, to be so thoroughly destabilizing that the only recourse was to push

³² Cooper, "Boys Don't Cry and Female Masculinity," 44- 45.

³³ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 73.

³⁴ A widely circulated UK newspaper.

³⁵ Annabelle Willox, "Branding Teena: (Mis)Representations in the Media," *Sexualities* 6, (2003): 412.

back, to deny Brandon's social identity, an identity that he chose to personally deploy and instead opting for the grounding of his female-sexed body as the site to make Brandon's life (and death) coherent to Willox.

Willox's analysis reflects the society's preoccupation with discovering a *real* truth about gender transgressive lives, because the discomfort elicited by a lived experience read against the state of the body becomes almost overwhelming. This insistence on the truth of a body would also seem to imply that the reality of the lived experience proves to be a deception. Brandon Teena's death is one of the most famous examples of the media's history with mishandling gender transgressive narratives, but it is far from the only.

Handling of trans lives in the media has evolved, rather than emphasizing an implication of deception, there has been a shift in the ways in which the truth of gender is portrayed in the media. In the span of two decades media has been utilized to express a framework that reconciles the destabilizing ability of the trans experience, and that is the association with and reproduction of the "wrong body" narrative. The uncertainty has been exchanged for a new understanding of the transgender experience.

Medicalization of Transgender:

The experience model that has seemingly become a default for the media to articulate gender transgressive experiences is that of the "wrong body" narrative. The "wrong body" narrative is often told as transgender individuals aligning themselves with a dissociated experience between gender-identity and biological sex. Trans identities come in a much larger variety and exist in greater complexity than solely as dysphoric

relationships between internal identity and biologically constructed and socially assigned sex.³⁶

The medical establishment has had a long history in its intervention and pathologization of trans lives. Through the “wrong body” discourse, medicine seeks to claim, “one’s real sex is determined by gender identity. On the basis of this native identity one affirms that one has always really been the woman or the man that one claims to be. In both versions, one is effectively a man or woman ‘trapped in the wrong body.’³⁷ Sex and gender again work to inform one another, but instead of the body being treated as an irrefutable site of truth, as was seen in *The Guardian*’s reporting of the circumstances of Brandon Teena’s murder, it is seen as the area that must be brought into compliance with gender identity, rather than the other way around. Such a reading does have the potential to bring power and bestow agency onto the person who seeks to openly deploy their gender-identity in a way that requires the compliance of their body.

While the “wrong body” narrative creates some space for transgender people to access medical transitional tools such as hormone therapy or types of surgery, the framework does not completely free-up individual’s agency in accessing such medical technologies. Anxieties over agency in medical treatment arise when transgender bodies are present. David Valentine describes these anxieties in his discussion of the ways in which the realm of SRS (sex reassignment surgery) is consistently framed through contending views of agency. Valentine attempts to look away from the subject of the

³⁶ I acknowledge that for many transgender-identified individuals; the split between their gender identity and physical sex is dysphoria-inducing and has the potential to be a site of incredible hardship. I, in no way mean to denigrate their experience. Rather, for the scope of this project I focus and critique that this narrative does not hold true for all trans individuals and that the lack of media attention regarding alternative experiences is damaging in its own right.

³⁷ Bettcher, “Trapped in the Wrong Theory,” 383.

transsexual *choosing* to have SRS by questioning why it is that the non-transsexual *chooses not* to have SRS.³⁸ When contending with the notion of choice and agency

Valentine states,

the argument has been made that transsexuality is a *mental* disorder and that using surgical methods to treat it is at best complicity with (mentally ill) transsexuals' choices. Others fear that the doctors' authority has been challenged because transsexuals' demands for SRS, and their ability to mount textbook narratives of their transsexuality to access surgery, has displaced the doctor's traditional role of making rational diagnostic decisions. In these accounts transsexuals – as mentally ill people – are represented as incapable of making such a radical choice and are displacing those who should be the real agents: doctors.³⁹

The threat of transgender individuals *choosing* SRS is the undercurrent of these arguments. It is a threat that bodies experiencing their physical state as incongruent with their gender understanding are inauthentic and that they are accessing tools that are dangerous to the assumed binary categories of sex and gender.

Regarded in earlier generations as transsexuality, medicine has come to look upon the supposed mis-matched experience of gender and the body as a treatable condition.⁴⁰

When trans identity is regarded through a medical scope it is considered to be

In the tradition of the medical model of disease, a search for a cause is undertaken in order to initiate stamping put the 'disease' through 'treatment: and/or prevention.' Therefore, we must seriously question whether transsexuality, is a 'disease' requiring medical intervention or whether it is a cultural symptom of the *dis-ease* evoked by challenging the traditional Western sex and gender code.⁴¹

The unaligned body and expression of gender become fixable in this lens. Sex and gender brought back into a Western understanding of harmony (and ideally back into an image

³⁸ David Valentine, "Sue E. Generous: Toward a Theory of Non-Transsexuality," *Feminist Studies* 38, no. 1 (2012), 187.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 191-192.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 191. Valentine cites that SRS has been a largely accepted medical practice used as treatment for over forty years.

⁴¹ Gordene Olga Mackenzie, *Transgender Nation* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994), 60.

that satisfies the heteronormative standard), all cured through the miracle of science.

However, the authority that is invested within the medical institution as a site of knowledge, supposedly without bias, takes this understanding and makes it a definitive requirement.

Medical intervention, in such a case, provides the solution and encounters the person experiencing the pushback against hegemonic assertions of gender norms and the bodies they inhabit as the solvable problem. As Gordene Olga Mackenzie aptly noted in her 1994 book *Transgender Nation*:

such logic dictates that the idea of ‘wrong’ bodies assumes the existence of ‘right’ bodies. Right bodies, according to transsexual ideology, must match the gender of the individual; accordingly, masculine-acting people belong in male bodies and feminine-acting people belong in female bodies, thereby reinforcing sex and gender congruence demanded by contemporary American society.⁴²

Transgender was a term that originally sought to distance itself from a transsexual logic, however, the popularity of the “wrong body” narrative and its relation to transgender complicates and potentially serves to negate the attempt. As transgender, unintentionally it would seem, then casts those experiencing gender transgression as some form of wrong, or lesser, reinforcing those who live with a congruent sex and gender experience as right or superior.

The main problem of the “wrong body” narrative lies in its transformation as *the* narrative. Its appeal is its ability to do wonders in reducing the threat of destabilizing Western understandings of gender and restoring some form of the natural. “Ultimately, the assumption that one can be born in the “wrong body” reinforces sex dichotomization found in dominant ideology.”⁴³ Rather than contest what it means to make a man or a

⁴² Mackenzie, *Transgender Nation*, 62.

⁴³ Ibid.

woman, shifts are made so that the definitions remain, expanded by some degree, but largely intact. Rather than risk unpacking what constitutes gender, the medicalized understanding allows for a minimal adjustment that welcomes those who play by the “wrong body” rules into the fold as they reinforce and ascribe to the category of normative.

The “wrong body” narrative does nothing to directly challenge a heteropatriarchal hierarchy. Rather, it sets rigid standards for what constitutes transgender identity both in internal understandings of self and outward expression of identity, often calling for the intense stylization of the body that accompanies what is termed as sex reassignment surgery (popularly shortened to SRS) as proof of authenticity.

Early treatment regarded the normative as those who were willing to, by and large, meet heteropatriarchy’s standards of appearances. Richard Ekins and Dave King authors of *The Transgender Phenomenon*, describe the ways that the standards for treatment of transsexuality were outlined. Patients were considered by how well they would assimilate into the dominating political thoughts of the time;

transsexual patients and their emergence as unremarkable members of their reassigned sex, typically heterosexual and conventional, led inevitably to a privileging of a certain sort of transsexual experience and outcome at the expense of others... They gender migrated to accord with their bodies, and their sexuality was defined as heterosexual from the standpoint of their migration.⁴⁴

An added benefit to guarding the transsexual experience was the assurance that the outcome would conform to dominating ideas about how gendered beings were to interact with one another, in other words, the preservation of heterosexuality loomed over treatment. A goal that further served to tighten which forms of gender transgression

⁴⁴ Richard Ekins and Dave King, *The Transgender Phenomenon* (Thousand Oaks, CA: 2006), 79.

proved palatable to a larger society. Palatability cloaked itself in terms of the “successful” types of surgical transitions. The supposed expertise of these medical professionals has established the framework for a very particular model of trans experience, bestowed only to those who pass the test.

The intense guarding of this narrative and the rewarding of acceptable (to the medical establishment) outcomes is what constructs itself as intensely problematic. If the medicalized path towards gender expression is regulated to a particular script, there is less room for alternate narratives to come forth. Compounding this already stringent dynamic is the almost blind trust placed into medicine’s authority as an objective field of study is present in many media representations of trans folk. While it has cleared space for positive considerations of transgender identity, its capability to harm those who identify outside of this narrow realm, is great. The method of assimilation becomes apparent and the loss of nuance is almost assured.

If this is the sole model that mass media disseminates to the wider audience then the understandings that are reached are minimal and serve less to change the way we think about men and women, rather they reinforce notions of masculinity and femininity while vigilantly guarding the gate against attempts at destabilizing systems and hierarchies of gender.

Situating the Structure of News Journalism and Documentary

The televised presentation of transgender narratives brings multiple areas of inquiry into focus. Beyond the complexity of identity politics is the role that media, and more specifically television, plays in relaying the complexities of non-normative gender

experiences. To more carefully consider the interplay between the construction of trans narratives and the culture of American television it is important to recognize how the structure of news programming and the genre of the documentary work to produce the programs that attempt to explain a transgender experience to a largely inexperienced (and potentially resistant) audience.

Two of the programs that I analyze, ABC's *20/20: My Secret Self with Barbara Walters* and MSNBC's *Born in the Wrong Body*, were produced by network news divisions and intended for televised release while *Becoming Chaz* was first screened the Sundance Film Festival and then sold to be aired on the Oprah Winfrey Network (commonly referred to as OWN). The three programs varied in terms of accessibility. ABC proves to be the most accessible network discussed in this project. Its history as one of the three biggest nationally broadcast stations⁴⁵ in America establishes its tendency towards broad appeal.⁴⁶ MSNBC begins to narrow viewership in this project as it is a cable access news channel which requires a cable subscription.⁴⁷ And finally, OWN is a premium channel which requires a specific subscription generally packaged alongside a cable subscription.⁴⁸ There is a certain amount of importance in the decision to tell these stories in this format because of the weight due, in large part, to the legacy of television as a central mode of information and communication in American culture and public perception.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Jason Mittell, *Television and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 10. ABC, NBC, and CBS dominated television programming from the mid-1940's to the mid-1950's and set many American media standards that endure to today.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 31. Cable news channels have a smaller viewership thanks to the advent of narrowcasting which attempts to appeal to viewers through brand identity.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

My Secret Self and *Born in the Wrong Body* were produced in the distinct style of the news magazine genre. Unlike traditional news reporting, the news magazine format relies on investing in deeper explorations into a smaller amount of stories.⁵⁰ In the case of my chosen documentaries each hour-long program focuses specifically on the topic of exploring the lives of transgender-identified children and their families.

Writing and projects conceived within the realm of journalism operate differently than writing and projects conceived through academia. A large part of this difference is due to the separate approaches each field takes regarding the presentation of a narrative. “Journalistic media will tend to work within constraints and pressures related to time and space, to deadlines and temporal or spatial forms of presentation, which are alien to normal academic research.”⁵¹ Journalism works on subjects through a much more immediate relationship with time, whereas academia tends toward a perspective that can span years, accounting for patterns and trends. Due to the characteristics of the immediate and long-term, the knowledges produced by these fields can easily find themselves in contention with one another. This is not to claim that the two fields are inherently in opposition; both journalism and academia intend to produce and disseminate knowledge and greater awareness about the world.⁵²

The sympathetic nature of these programs often brings them under scrutiny. In general, the realm of news and current affair programs are considered to be serious, committed to the ability to portray reality. This commitment to “reality” genders the content as masculine, “while pure fantasy is sometimes dismissed as a pleasant

⁵⁰ Ibid., 136.

⁵¹ Jostein Gripsrud, “Scholars, Journalism, Television: Notes on Some Conditions for Mediation and Intervention,” in *Television and Common Knowledge*, ed. Jostein Gripsrud (New York: Routledge, 1999), 39.

⁵² Ibid.

indulgence.”⁵³ Such distinctions position fantasy and indulgence as feminine traits, implying a certain amount of frivolity about fictitious content while reaffirming the worth of serious masculine content. However, gendering content does not stop at an asserted binary between fiction and reality. In fact, the content of news programs are as subject to hierarchy.

News magazine programs emphasize the human-interest impact of their stories. Their structure aims to create more relatable narratives than traditional televised news stories which tend to last anywhere between two minutes to thirty seconds.⁵⁴ In crafting heroes and villains by offering audiences sympathetic situations to invest in, news magazine specials have proven themselves to be a low-cost and successful alternative to scripted television.⁵⁵ The added time and attention that is offered by the news magazine format’s emphasis on fewer stories presented with greater detail allows for stories to have a more in-depth exploration. This particular formula has resulted in products that are “generally considered to be good journalism.”⁵⁶

Despite the well-researched nature of many news magazine stories, its format must stand against preemptively dismissive attitudes. During the format’s early days of the 1970’s many journalists opposed the dramatic style, of programs like *60 Minutes*. The genre was accused of being manipulative and sensationalist and heavily criticized for the emotional foundation⁵⁷ that *60 Minutes* and the similarly structured programs that would

⁵³ Justin Lewis, “The Meaning of Real Life,” in *Reality TV: Remaking TV Culture*, ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 289.

⁵⁴ Walter Cummins and George Gordon, *Programming our Lives* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), 98.

⁵⁵ Mittell, *Television and American Culture*, 133-134.

⁵⁶ Cummins and Gordon, *Programming Our Lives*, 101.

⁵⁷ Mittell, *Television and American Culture*, 133-134.

follow, such as *20/20*, relied upon. Such accusations endure to this day and take fault with the biased intent behind the presentation of information.⁵⁸

Armed not only with sympathetic content, news magazine programs have the added element of correspondents (in place of traditional reporters), which usually consist of well-known public figures such as Barbara Walters. The correspondents serve to act as a clear and relatable personality instead of the traditional “detached authority”⁵⁹ common to news and current affairs programs. A well-known correspondent like Barbara Walters carries her own cultivated brand and fan base. Given her status as a fixture in journalism of the news magazine nature, Walters’ long-lived celebrity status⁶⁰ provides a draw independent of the subject matter on which she serves as a correspondent.

Claims to objectivity are traded on to implicate prestige and position in the hierarchy of journalism, carefully avoiding that reaching objectivity is and has always been an impossibility. Any implication that the format of news magazine journalism is more biased ignores the bias that has always permeated other forms of journalism. In fact, as more traditionally structured news programs and the recent advent of cable news channels (such as MSNBC, FOX News, CNN, etc.) came to rely more heavily on advertising profits and ratings, bias became an important marketing strategy.⁶¹ Many critics would indicate that attempts at objectivity and critical investigative focus have

⁵⁸ Ibid., 127, The ethics of journalism purport that participants of the field should diligently avoid presenting biased information and aim for professional objectivity.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 133.

⁶⁰ Walters has been involved in the field of journalism since the 1950’s.

⁶¹ Ibid., 139. The advent of audience demographics and structuring programming that appeals to intended audience sensibilities has proven to be the more profitable, and thus, more popular course of action amongst many television journalism outlets. The desire to appeal to desired demographics has shifted the way that American culture produces and consumes its news.

been traded for the successful formula of entertainment and confrontation that characterizes much of cable news channels.⁶²

Informative programming endures as a profitable venture in the realm of television.⁶³ While only two of the programs I chose for the purposes of this project fall under the realm of journalism,⁶⁴ all three can be classified as a form of documentary and all three have been televised. Documentaries may sustain many of the same criticisms as news magazine programs for their perceived inclination towards bias. This would seem unavoidable given that their structures mirror one another at points. Take, for example, the fact that a large part of a documentary's appeal lies in its "potential of a complete narrative rather than news's 'today's fragment' of a story."⁶⁵ This characteristic proves identical to that of the news magazine. Perhaps the more notable difference is the way in which the products of these genres are presented to, and perceived by, audiences.

The genre of documentary does not walk the same line of journalistic scorn that so often plagues the news magazine. Given that both genres can fulfill the same purpose, however, they are open to many of the same critiques. Documentaries are not necessarily expected to strive towards a goal of detached objectivity as the genre's primary purpose is to construct a compelling narrative. Operating more complexly than simply seeking to inform as traditional journalism does, documentaries "explicitly aim to show how life is, rather than how stories are."⁶⁶ This is to say that documentaries are produced with

⁶² Ibid., 137.

⁶³ Mittell, *Television and American Culture*, 134.

⁶⁴ ABC's *20/20: My Secret Self with Barbara Walters* and MSNBC's *Born in the Wrong Body* are considered as journalism projects because of the networks and programs they were produced by are network news divisions.

⁶⁵ John Ellis, "Television as Working-Through," in *Television and Common Knowledge*, ed. Jostein Gripsrud (New York: Routledge, 1999), 62.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

investment in the idea that the narratives they portray will teach or inform audiences without the assistance of a script designed to express a particular message. This unscripted strategy to inform through reality is another shared trait between the news magazine and documentary formats. In showing “how life is,” a narrative is presented through presumed reality of life. Reality and authenticity come to serve as the documentary genre’s tool for establishing hierarchical appeal.

It is imperative that I assert that the genre’s compulsion in striving to portray “how life is” does not mean that it provides some form of objective reality from which an audience may derive the truth of “minority view points.”⁶⁷ Programming’s content, no matter its unscripted format, is still contingent on the assumed interests of an audience and a filmmaker’s crafting. Much as news programming touts its objectivity while simultaneously deploying bias in coverage of events to increase viewership and reflect cultural hierarchies, so too does the documentary genre engage in structuring and crafting the circumstances that constitutes “how life is.” An audience’s “pleasure is contingent on a text’s perceived social weight or historical relevance...”⁶⁸ There is perhaps as much crafting around unscripted programming as there is around fictional scripted programming. Simply because a program belongs or aligns with the documentary genre due to its reliance on ‘reality,’ does not mean that it offers any objective portrayal of circumstances or character.

Reality, when considering documentaries, becomes an interesting concept. Much like objectivity, it is impossible to ever claim to portray. Reality proves to be far more complex than fixed. The genre of documentary is meant to relay knowledge through

⁶⁷ Susan Murray, “‘I Think We Need a New Name for It’: The Meeting of Documentary and Reality TV,” 43.

⁶⁸Ellis, “Television as Working-Through,” 53.

observing an individual or group's reality. Those who are featured in documentaries are assumed to present themselves exactly as they operate in their everyday lives. They are not intended to portray or act as a particular "character." If we, as an audience, keep the "how life is" model in mind, we are already positioned to anticipate learning about the world from the perspective of another person, not from a message intended by a traditionally scripted story. John Ellis claims that "[p]eople in documentaries may be playing themselves, but it is they themselves that they are *playing*, and sometimes not very well. Part of the interest of observational documentaries lies in the waywardness of their characters."⁶⁹ Here, Ellis seems to posit that the subjects of documentaries often fail to perform themselves well, indicating that perhaps there is a better more real self that they fail to portray for an audience.

I cautiously engage with what Ellis seems to imply when he claims that participants of documentaries can play themselves poorly. While Ellis does not claim that participants *always* play themselves poorly, there is still the uncomfortable insinuation that there is a *better* version that might prove more valuable or congruent with the "how life is" documentary model. Ellis seems to imply that performance of self and the documentary genre are at odds. If there is a way to play oneself "not well" or poorly, then it would also seem to imply that there is a *better* way to play oneself, a right way, or perhaps a more stable authenticity that must be achieved to assist the documentary's ability to inform through the reality of experience.

It could also be argued that Ellis is claiming that participants on camera are not always able to represent themselves or their interests well, thus providing a misleading

⁶⁹ Ibid., 63.

representation of themselves to an audience. Given the nature of the documentary genre, representation runs the risk of being misread as the whole of a participant. Such a stance is dismissive of the potential for multiplicity and complexity of persona that any particular participant of a documentary might embody or express.

Rather than seeing these varying performances of self as the genre's failure to accurately portray reality, perhaps the desire for stable notions of authentic expressions of a singular stable persona as the sole site of valuable knowledge should be revisited. To place a value on a supposed well-played self appeals to an audience's desire for certainty and categorization. To embrace a fluidity of personality is to concede that there may not be a sole true self to be portrayed. Such an acknowledgement endangers the documentary genre's insistence on "how life is," dismissing a binary of authentic and inauthentic.

As troubling as notions around singular authentic portrayals of self can be, Ellis' analysis is not entirely off-track. Ellis' appraisal of "wayward characters" in documentaries can allow for more critical attention to the genre's (and by extension its participants') constructed nature. This proposed critical perspective acknowledges that "[t]he distinctions we make between forms of nonfictional television are not based on empirical evidence but largely contained in the evaluative connotations that insist on separating information from entertainment, liberalism from sensationalism, and public service from commercialism."⁷⁰ Though documentary is seen as a higher form of television for its insistence on education, it does not exist outside of methods of marketing to audiences.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 54.

Documentaries are as subject to the whims of market pressures as any other genre of television programming. While the genre is often perceived as pertaining to issues of social importance, a documentary's structure and subsequent marketing is not entirely reliant on its content. The social weight of any given program "is a rhetorical stance that can be mobilized in an effort to endorse or authenticate a particular television text and attract an audience who cherishes liberal notions of social responsibility or public service."⁷¹ Through this understanding, the content of the documentary becomes malleable, able to be packaged to draw an audience that is already prepared to indulge in their entertainment as it is delivered in a form preconceived as educational. The documentary, when constructed in such terms, becomes less of an assured reality and more of a perspective or lens of a type of reality, still subject to construction by the desires of those producing or airing the project.

Perhaps instead of faulting a participant for a poor performance of self it might prove more beneficial to consider the nature of the genre of documentary itself. Documentaries have "traditionally been assumed to be rather high-minded, and if not fully educational, then at least informative."⁷² In the case of these three documentaries chosen for this project there is a very real interest in attempting to educate, or at least inform, audiences about the lives of transgender people.

Claims around authenticity are extremely familiar territory for transgender individuals. Ellis' assertion about documentary participants and their ability to play themselves takes on a potentially harmful position when applied to trans identities. Through the medicalization of gender non-normativity, trans bodies are often judged in

⁷¹ Murray, "I Think We Need a New Name for It': The Meeting of Documentary and Reality TV," 44.

⁷² Ibid., 41.

terms of how genuinely medical professionals gauge their narratives to be and how closely they resemble hegemonic understandings of men and women. The sincerity of their identities is held to institutionally prescribed guidelines;⁷³ complicating notions of agency amongst more broadly (non-binary) trans identified individuals who are perhaps resistant to being pathologized, but still desire treatments that assist in the stylization of their bodies. Individuals who wish to access medical assistance in their transition must first present themselves as being “authentic” to a medical authority, adhering to whatever standards have been deemed as markers of true instances of transgender identity. This often results in a supposedly correct way of existing as transgender. Gender has long been argued as complex and far too fluid to be contained within a traditional man/woman binary, so too do I argue there is a similar fluid quality to personality.

Of course, discourses around the authenticity of experiences that audiences might not share holds the potential to become quickly heated when contextualized against trans narratives. However, to cast judgment about a subject who is supposedly not acting in an authentic manner, to sit in judgment as an audience about the veracity of another’s experience is all a part of the documentary formula.

It is perhaps this dynamic that allows for the participants of documentaries to serve as characters as they are not perceived to be whole and complex individuals. Rather, they are “wayward” points of interest, whose presence is intended to relay a “minority viewpoint” through a complex dynamic of education through entertainment, thus serving the filmmaker’s agenda.

⁷³ Dan Irving, “Normalized Transgressions: Legitimizing the Transsexual Body as Productive,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013), 21.

Caricature of self, presented by participants' performance of themselves or by the framing of their reactions to situations they encounter, contributes to entertainment value (and educational value). In the case of framing individuals who seek to push against binary gender systems, the documentary genre, "encourage[s] speculation about character and motive within powerfully defined situations."⁷⁴ Trans participants are now subjects judged on the authenticity of their motives by audiences searching for the articulation of a very particular medically supported narrative. The sometimes dramatic reality and potentially equally dire stakes of a transgender narrative provide excellent material for a format that relies on an audience's desire to speculate about a character involved in an unfamiliar situation. Judgments about character and sincerity become the standing from which a (presumably) cisgender audience can find the empathy, sympathy, or pity to identify with, or root for, an individual whose existence asks them to rethink the assumed naturally occurring gender binary in American culture.

My Secret Self

My Secret Self: A Story of Transgender Children originally aired in 2007 was the first of the documentaries to be televised. Aired on the ABC network it had the largest potential viewership of the three documentaries analyzed in this project as the network is nationally broadcast and the most accessible as its content does not require any sort of subscription to watch.⁷⁵ The program opens with Barbara Walters' voice overlaying generic footage of newborns and young children declaring that, "from the moment we're born our gender identity is no secret. We're either a boy or a girl gender. Gender

⁷⁴ Ellis, "Television as Working-Through," 63.

⁷⁵ Mittell, *Television and American Culture*, 10. ABC was one of three national networks that set enduring standards for television programming.

organizes our world into pink or blue.”⁷⁶ Walters continues on, describing the way in which gender dictates the material reality of our lives from the clothes that we wear to the toys that we play with when we are children, framing it as a rather simplistic equation of pink or blue. She begins to slowly complicate this equation. As Walters appears on screen for the first time, she begins by asking that her audience “open [their] hearts and [their] minds as we bring [the audience] the extraordinary⁷⁷ and very intimate struggle of three American families.”⁷⁸ From the start, this particular *20/20* special reads as a basic probe into what supposedly constitutes transgender identity and life, heavily reliant on the concept of children who insist that they have the “wrong” bodies.

The three families of focus in the *My Secret Self* program are, from the outset, labeled as “American.” More than a simple nod to the nationality of the families, the use of the term “American” is intended to suggest something important about these families to their audience. I argue that the term is deployed in an effort to normalize the transgender children through the re-inscription of dominant ideals about what is seen as desirable in the American family. “American,” as it is deployed throughout *My Secret Self* operates to convey a very particular type of normality, which sets the tone for the

⁷⁶ *20/20, My Secret Self: A Story of Transgender Children*, Televison, ABC News, 2007. Such a simplistic analysis of the gender binary sets the tone of the program to follow. For a more nuanced analysis of the way in which the gender binary operates please see Lorber’s discussion in *Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics*.

⁷⁷ The deployment of the term extraordinary effectively differentiates as being othered the three families that participate in the documentary. While the term could be read as benign or even positive, it can also conjure images of the legacies of bodies that have been “othered,” described as “wonders” displayed in as attractions from the mid-19th to mid-20th century for their extraordinary difference, their freakish nature. For a deeper exploration on the history of freak shows and othered bodies see Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness and Liberation* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1999).

⁷⁸ *20/20, My Secret Self: A Story of Transgender Children*, Televison, ABC News, 2007.

context, and criteria that trans identified people must meet before they are deemed as worthy of tolerance or acceptance from the larger population.

In the case of *My Secret Self*, all three families consist of two married and heterosexually partnered parents, existing in (or, at least assumed to exist in) the middle-class, and all participants (children and parents) present as racially white. The transgender-identified children of focus are two young transgender girls Jazz and Riley, ages 5 and 10 respectively, and 17 year-old FTM Jeremy.⁷⁹ These families have been carefully chosen for their close approximation to the intersecting identities that comprise Audre Lorde's "mythical norm."⁸⁰ Lorde explains that this projected idea of American normality looks something like being "white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure."⁸¹ The closer they are to this intersection of privileged identities, the more coherently and therefore favorably, they read in the eyes of dominant culture. The families and their proximity to the "mythical norm" somehow informs their perceived marketability and relatability. There is an underlying assumption at work that the "mythical norm" is held to be a universally comprehensible existence.

Given the complex nature of transgender identity, grounding the stories of these contradictory trans identities in family structures that reside nearest to this unreachable intersection is an intentional strategy. It works to strengthen the normalization of not just the families, but their transgender identified children as well. The program utilizes a normative gender binary as the core reference point to explain transgender identity to its

⁷⁹ Ibid. Jeremy explicitly states that he does not wish to be recognized as trans. He wishes to be seen as male. He presents an interestingly complex figure as he willingly utilized the term FTM while reading his coming-out letter (originally given to his parents) on camera.

⁸⁰ Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference*," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 116.

⁸¹ Ibid.

audience, consistently reinforcing the idea that the children featured are biologically incongruent with their gender identity. This is done through the rhetoric of the children identifying with clothing that is gendered as opposite of their assigned gender, the preference for pink when a child assigned male at birth should prefer blue. The challenge to the gender binary is handled at a very fundamental level.

The heterosexually coupled parents of the transgender children in the program work at creating a familiar coherency for the audience. The families, in all of their approaching mythical norm presentation, are intended to anchor the audience's ability and comfort in what comes across as an almost Cleaver-esque⁸² representation of American family structure deployed in an effort to contrast their children's noncompliance with the sex-as-gender schema. Put simply, if the family is presented as "normally" as possible, the children's transgender identity enjoys a certain amount of privileged authenticity.

The featured families play into the overall strategy of the program. While highlighting the "struggle" of families with transgender children, the desire to frame these families in as verging on bland helps forestall arguments that might claim that the child's transgender identity stems from an 'unnatural' upbringing. *My Secret Self* instead chooses to make a case for the simultaneously remarkable situations and largely unremarkable lives of the families involved in the documentary.

The families are all portrayed as actively supportive during the documentary, the mothers of each family carrying the brunt of the interviews. Some parents admit their

⁸² Mittell, *Television and American Culture*, 249. A nod to the American sitcom "Leave it to Beaver." The Cleavers were a fictional family that upheld many American midcentury ideals about heterosexual marriage and nuclear families as pillars of American integrity and values. This particular format of domestic comedy endures in the contemporary era.

difficulty in coming to terms with their child's identity but they are framed as having overcome their conflicted feelings. Good normal families produce good normal children. As the mother of the only FTM identified participant bluntly states, "My child is a boy. It's not my fault that he was born transgender and it's not his fault."⁸³ While the statement alone may seem innocuous, framed in the larger context of the singular familial structure represented in the program, it conveys an important unspoken assertion. Of course the families cannot be to blame for their child's trans identities because the composition of the families serves to reinforce normative ideals about what American families should look like. They are intended to represent the antithesis of the deviance that is so often assigned to their children's' identity. Tey Meadows explains that, "[b]odies become legible if they have procreative potential. Similarly, marriages become illegible if they lose that potential. There is no rewriting gender without similarly dismantling the boundaries around legal ideas of reproduction and family."⁸⁴ The transgender identities of the children featured in the program pose as the issue that the audience must come to understand, their identities cross boundaries.

Through the use of normative shorthand, the families provide and are *provided* (to audiences) as a comprehensible base with which to connect. While their children's presence works to disrupt an essentialized gender binary, the parents serve to both as sympathetic figures normalized and legible through their heterosexual marriages and, because of their privileged intersection of identities, are assumed faultless for their

⁸³ 20/20, *My Secret Self: A Story of Transgender Children*, Televison, ABC News, 2007.

⁸⁴ Tey Meadows, "A Rose is a Rose," *Gender and Society* 24, no. 6 (2010): 816. While reproduction is an incredibly important topic in the construction and maintenance of the gender binary, it is beyond the scope of this particular project.

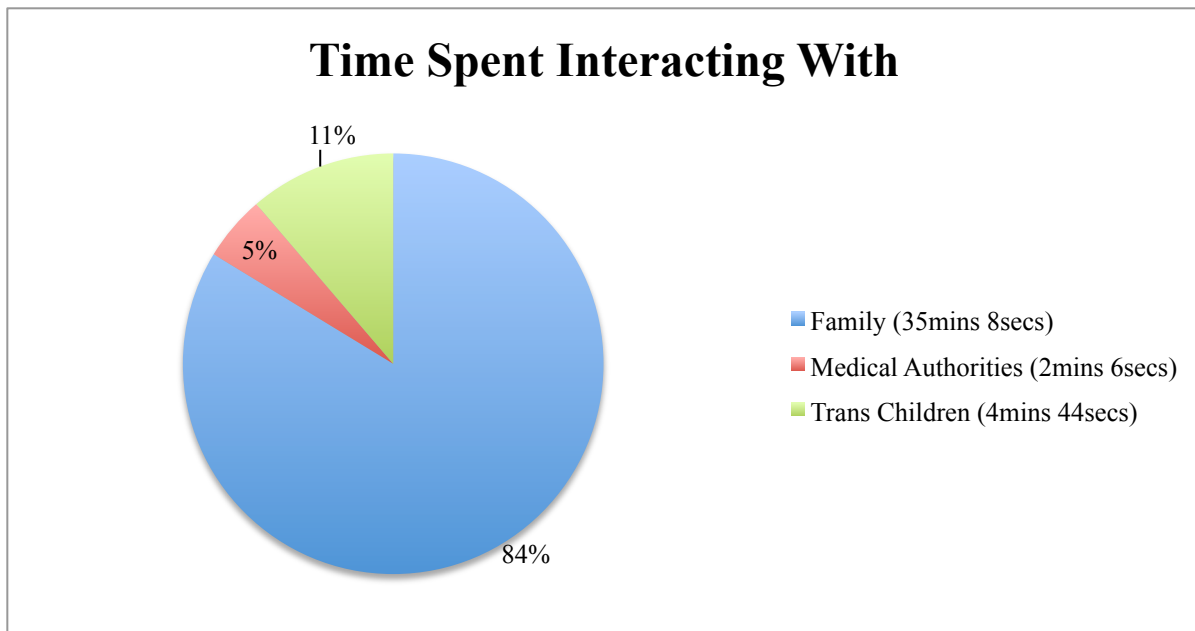
children's transgender identity. Of course the mother did nothing wrong, she represents everything that is legible and celebrated in mainstream American culture.

However, in spite of the relative privilege her identities afford her, it is important to note that this mother was still compelled to deny fault for her son's transgender identity. She denies fault for both her son and herself. As the parent society conceives as most responsible for child-rearing she protects her child by simultaneously protecting herself from blame. While she does meet many of the standard that constitutes normative identity she, and the documentary, are proactive in staving off a misread. Her denial of fault forces the audience to consider the figure delivering the message. It attempts to guide the audience to actively engage with her normativity and come to the conclusion that the many ways in which her identity is valued and normative does warrant her the benefit of the doubt.

It is important to maintain that what might be legible to society must not simply slip into being conceived as what is natural. There is nothing inherently natural about the family structure represented in *My Secret Self*, but mainstream culture and attitudes has informed media depictions of such arrangements as being the most preferable. The nuclear family represented in the program is meant to function as a wholly unthreatening archetype with which viewers should be unable to contest simply because it has been reinforced time and again as the ideal. Walters' places emphasis on the supposed normality of the families that she interviews. Coded in these claims of normal are the unspoken assumptions of what is not considered normal and thus, what is considered not American. Given the relatively tight format of the families that were interviewed, any variation in family structure threatens the overall message of relatability that is desired in

the project. In treating the relatively privileged position of the participating families as the standard, the single transgender child from each family becomes the only component that disrupts their otherwise normative and privileged existence. The child must be accounted for to explain the continued solid American existence of the family as a whole.

The intensive focus given to the families, particularly the parents, permeates the interactions that Walters has with the children themselves. In comparison to the amount of time that comprises Walters' interviews with the families, the children themselves are given noticeably less direct screen time in which to articulate their own identities. The graph below provides a breakdown corresponding to the amount of time *My Secret Self* spent presenting direct interaction with the transgender-identified child, the child's family, or a medical expert.



The transgender children of *My Secret Self* accounted for 4 minutes and 44 seconds in a broadcast special that lasted for 41 minutes and 58 seconds overall. Their relatively peripheral status in the program reveals the ways in which the children and

their personal experiences with gender were mostly talked *about* rather than *engaged with*. The focus of the documentary seems concerned with normal families and their experiences navigating the world with a transgender child rather than the story of transgender children experiencing a cisnormative world.

There is room to push back against this particular reading when we consider the stakes of the program. Given the level of accessibility afforded by being broadcast on ABC and the young ages of the participants, there is a very clear desire to protect through the facilitation of understanding transgender identity as not being deviant or delusional. This approach results in limiting the time and space in which the children have to share their narratives with the audience, instead the audience is given far more time and space to empathize with the families as their cisnormative experience and reactions to their children's identities proves far more relatable. The secret, it seems, belongs less to the children who have fought for a life in the gender most comfortable to them, and more to the parents who must reconcile cisnormative desires they may have projected onto their children with the trans lives their children have demanded.

Walters as Proxy

My Secret Self is composed of a variety of factors that strive toward a broad appeal. Walters, as a prominent news correspondent and celebrity figure, has the ability to draw an audience through name recognition alone. Pairing her name appeal with the reputation for journalism that *20/20* as a series has cultivated since its inception in the late 1970's on a nationally broadcast television station establishes the terms for the program's potential reach. Trans identity is a minority in a heavily cisnormative world.

The documentary approach of education through the portrayal of marginalized experiences once again comes into play when considering the intent of the program.

Barbara Walters' involvement provides an incredibly rich site of analysis. Her very presence distinguishes *My Secret Self* from *Born in the Wrong Body: All in the Family* and *Becoming Chaz*. Walters is visible on screen with participants, she is shown engaged in interviews with families and speaking with the children one-on-one. Her constant presence steers the program away from performing what Donna Haraway refers to as a "god trick."⁸⁵ Rather than existing as an unseen authority, Walters' inquiries and interactions place her as a participant of the events. She is not an omniscient presence crafting the story out of sight; she is very much involved throughout the process of learning about the experiences of the families and their children. The fact that Walters identifies as a woman and is a mother is certainly worth mentioning as well, her empathy and supposed ability to relate with the children as she interviews them reads as her inherently nurturing ability stemming from these facets of her identity.

All of these factors culminate into Walters' ability to serve as a proxy for viewers at home. Walters becomes the entry point into transgender identity. Her simplistic assertions on how bodies are gendered and socialized in the program's introduction establish the cisgender experience as the experience that the majority of her audience can identify with. As she attempts to frame and explain the experiences of the transgender children she comes to meet, she falls back on a framework that relies on cisnormative language. In the first interview featured in the program, Walters prompts the parents of a

⁸⁵ Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 582. Haraway deploys this phrase as a way to explain that claiming objective knowledge, removing oneself and one's experiences from the process of creating knowledge and declaring it as a truth is an attempt at playing God.

six-year-old transgender girl by saying, “Your child was born a boy and now you call him a girl, yes?”⁸⁶ While the phrasing of the question is clunky and awkward it asserts gender at birth with a form of primary importance, indicated by Walters’ reliance on the gendered pronoun “him.”

My Secret Self is sprinkled with similar moments of Walters’ inconsistent gendering. There are a few possible explanations that can be entertained regarding this. The first is the possibility that Walters fails to fully understand the difference between the children feeling *as if* they are their preferred gender and feeling that they *are* their preferred gender. The second possibility is that Walters, in attempting to correctly gender the children, is reliant on a model that places primary emphasis on gender assignment at birth. Through this model she struggles to navigate the language of recognizing transgender identity as anything other than a non-normative existence. The third, and I argue most interesting possibility, is that Barbara intentionally utilizes a framework that she believes her audience will best understand and elects to play the role of proxy.

This third option provides a far more nuanced way with which to regard the program. In this option Walters is aware of the cisnormative language that she deploys, but is willing to engage in its clumsiness for the sake of her audience’s comprehension. While this particular reading might prove as a stretch, it opens up what the intention behind the project. If Walters is aware of her ability to act as her audience’s proxy, then the way in which she approaches both the children and families stems from approaching the situation similarly to how any one of her viewers who had been previously uneducated and potentially unaware might. There is a very real struggle of gendering that

⁸⁶ 20/20, *My Secret Self: A Story of Transgender Children*, Televison, ABC News, 2007.

Walters plays out for her audience. As a proxy, Walters stands to facilitate education in a way that is distinctly unique from the previously discussed “how life is” model standard to so many other documentaries.

My Secret Self presents as a sympathetic entry point into the experience of transgender children. It spends the majority of its time settling the terms of what constitutes transgender identity and works to craft sympathetic figures for audience to connect with in the hopes of fostering education about transgender children.

Born in the Wrong Body

MSNBC’s *Born in the Wrong Body: All in the Family* is an installment in a larger documentary series that specifically focuses on telling stories of transgender Americans. It is comparable to *My Secret Self* given that they were both produced as news entertainment piece, but differ in overall format. *My Secret Self* with Walters’ participation presents as more closely to the news magazine format. *Born in the Wrong Body* resembles a traditional documentary adhering more closely to the previously discussed “how life is” model.

This particular installment focuses on the transition process of FTM mentor Evan Davis and his teenage FTM mentee, Christopher Mari. Mari, it is revealed, legally becomes Christopher Mari Davis in homage to his mentor and father figure. The program opens to a male narrator’s voice imposed over footage of a family dinner. The narrator sets the tone of the program with, “[a]t first glance this looks like the typical all-American family, a Sunday dinner with everyone gathered around the table.”⁸⁷ From the

⁸⁷ *Born in the Wrong Body*, Television, MSNBC, 2007.

outset the audience is being prepared to engage with a *not* normal American family. In bringing attention to the supposed normality of the moment the documentary is automatically positioned to disrupt it. The narrator goes on to complicate the image that the audience is presented with, revealing that the family the audience is presented with is in fact comprised of a single mother, a young son with mild autism, a daughter who has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and a son who identifies as transgender.⁸⁸ The program, within the first few minutes, takes on a nuanced approach to looking at an American family reconciling with a transgender child. In comparison to *My Secret Self*, *Born in the Wrong Body* begins by challenging dominant conceptions of what a supposedly “normal” family might present as. This particular documentary engages interestingly with normative American values, simultaneously complicating and reinforcing notions of the composition of an American family.

Clearly, *Born in the Wrong Body* upholds the essentialized internal authentic gender that was so prevalent in *My Secret Self* by title alone. Relying on similar narratives of both Mari and Davis’ affiliation toward masculine clothing, early disidentification with femininity, *Born in the Wrong Body* works to establish the authenticity of Mari and Davis’ claims. However, in contrast to *My Secret Self*, *Born in the Wrong Body* complicates ideas about American family structure by casting a family that exists somewhat further from the intersection of identities that compose Lorde’s mythical norm.⁸⁹ *Born in the Wrong Body*

Mari’s only featured biological parent is a divorced single mother of three children when the documentary introduces her. Her ex-husband lives in Italy and seems

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex,” 116.

to have a limited amount of contact with his children, especially his transgender son. Over the course of the documentary it is revealed that she and Davis became romantically involved, resulting in a three-year relationship. The documentary often shows the entire family and Davis interacting with one another through family dinners, outings, and homework sessions. Davis is shown as a father figure not just to Mari, but to his siblings as well. Important to the construction of this simultaneously normative and non-normative family is Davis' ability to pass as a man. His facial hair, dress shirts, and neckties aid in his paternal image, it is not difficult to imagine Davis as another example of a white, middle-class father.

Transmen in *Born in the Wrong Body* are crafted as normatively as possible in the way that they relate to their new family. An FTM bachelor becomes the father of a son that he has a very special ability to understand, and an un-fathered youth ends up with a librarian for a dad. As opposed to *My Secret Self* which begins from families that occupy the normative, the Mari-Davis family arrives at the normative, after transition, crafting an incredibly complex narrative around family that positions the participants as approaching the mythical norm and resisting it all at the same time.

The complexity of the family that audiences are faced with is that they elude categorization. While the family presents as white and middle class, they willingly live in two separate homes as Davis still retains his own residence for the majority of the week. Mari's mother and Davis see themselves as a heterosexual couple, but contextually they and their family have the potential to read as queer. Their family may present as near or approaching the mythical norm all while the terms of the family they have built can be read as resistant to it.

The family, over the course of the documentary, goes from deviating from normative standards to embodying them in many ways. When audiences are first introduced to the Maris, they are presented as a family of three children and a single mother. They themselves are transformed into a heterosexually partnered two-parent family. The knowledge that audiences come to have about the intricacies to their lives is what garners the proverbial second (and potentially queered) perspective. Overall, the specificities of their situation prove to be incredibly layered all while their surface-level presentation seems incredibly simple.

Without the immediate presence of a narrator Mari and Davis are given the space to more directly tell their own stories. In many ways this frees up the format to be more directly involved with the participants themselves. The only misgendering that occurs through the course of the documentary is when Mari's maternal aunt is featured. She consistently refers to Mari by his birth name and utilizes feminine gender pronouns, asserting that she feels her sister is allowing her child too much agency, too early in life. She is never even seen interacting with Mari or her sister. Unlike the potential the Walters served as a proxy, Mari's aunt is never seen being corrected on pronouns, the audience does not navigate coming to any particular understanding about transgender identity through her. Her disregard of the authenticity of Mari's identity is replicated in the rhetoric she uses to talk about her sister's relationship with Davis.

Despite the fact that Mari's mother and Davis consider themselves to be involved a heterosexual relationship, the aunt divulges that she teases her sister for being in a lesbian relationship, even as she deploys the use of masculine pronouns when talking about Davis. To a certain extent she is reading the truth of Mari's identity in the sex he

was assigned at birth, while understanding Davis' preferred gender identity as his authentic identity. She then reveals that her understanding of sexuality is largely based in sexual object-choice.⁹⁰ As she understands that Davis was assigned female at birth, she infers that as he is without a biological penis. To her, his sexual relationship with her sister read as homosexual.

Mari's aunt is a rather honest (and potentially risky) figure included in the documentary. Her understanding of the situation could potentially resemble the attitude that many viewers inexperienced with transgender identity may approach the documentary with. The act of learning and understanding the authenticity of transgender bodies without tying them exclusively to a cisnormative standard is jeopardized through her borderline dismissive perspective.

The portrayal of an openly unsupportive opinion is another distinguishing factor between *My Secret Self* and *Born in the Wrong Body*. By following a more traditional documentary format, the program seems to be less concerned with leading viewers to a singular perspective, while still leaning towards a sympathetic portrayal of its transgender participants. It proves to be the most difficult text to read for all of the things it seems to do correctly while remaining almost frustrating simplistic in its portrayal of one aspect of the lives of a singular family.

Becoming Chaz

Becoming Chaz presents as an interesting text in the scheme of this project. Produced by World of Wonder Productions, the documentary is unlike *My Secret Self* and

⁹⁰ Object-choice is usually deployed to discuss the ways in which we assume we are attracted to bodies sexed as either male or female, presumably possessing a certain type of genitalia.

Born in the Wrong Body: All in the Family as it is done in the style of a biographical character profile. *Becoming Chaz* is positioned as an incredibly valuable site of information for two reasons. Firstly, throughout the course of the documentary audiences engage with understandings of transgender identity through the documentary's offerings of normative assertions about both the function and interaction of masculinity and femininity. Secondly, the production of the documentary reveals the ways in which transgender identity provides a ripe opportunity for commodification of the other repackaged as the celebration of a non-normative body's triumph over adversity.

The documentary focuses specifically on the celebrity figure of Chaz Bono, transgender-identified son of the former 1970's pop idol and late California statesman, Sonny Bono and the seemingly ever-reinvented pop culture fixture, Cher. In many ways, continuing interest in Bono's life springs from the enduring fascination that the American public has held with his parents. This fascination certainly extends into their lives after their marriage ended, but there is an enduring nostalgia for many Americans regarding Sonny Bono and Cher as the married music duo they initially became famous for being.⁹¹ Chaz Bono, as the literal product of their union, has lived with the reality of being a "public figure" and the complications of secondhand fame.

Despite the fact that Bono's parents were divorced early in his childhood, his life in the public eye has trained him to recognize the ways in which the entertainment industry and media operate. He is shown in the documentary as possessing a certain

⁹¹ *Becoming Chaz*, directed by Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato (2011; Los Angeles: World of Wonder, 2011.), DVD. A large part of the fascination stems from Sonny and Cher's popular televised variety show of which Chaz, then known as Chastity, was a constant fixture. Bono is quite forthcoming with the distance he perceives to exist between his childhood on stage with parents and the person he perceives himself to be today. He indicates his discomfort at the enduring attention that his early childhood has brought him.

amount of savvy around the difficulties and complexities that arise when considering his relationship to media and the larger public. His knowledge of navigating media and public scrutiny is an extension of his upbringing, he would have learned early on in life the ways in which to engage with interest in his personal life in the public forum.⁹²

Filmed over the span of months during Bono's first year of medical transition, *Becoming Chaz* marks events such as top surgery, the process of hormone treatment, and a public coming-out. The tone of the documentary is set early on with an off-screen interviewer asking Bono about his earliest memory; Bono replies that he lacks any memories of his early childhood. He comments that his parents had been separated for as long as he could remember, asserting that he cannot recall when his parents were the 'Sonny and Cher' of American memory. It would seem that even in his framing of his own recollection, Bono defines his experience as marked and partially reliant on the experiences of his famous parents. Interestingly, the documentary is formatted in such a way that his famous parents and family *seem* to be peripheral in the telling of his transition. However, the fame of his family and his parents is what propels the entire documentary to begin with. At no point does the audience forget that his parents are Sonny Bono and Cher. For an audience that grew up aware of Sonny Bono's conservative Republican stance in politics and Cher's wild popularity in gay communities, while the screen time and direct attention given to his parents might prove minimal, their presence always lingers around the ways in which Chaz chooses to conduct his transition.

Becoming Chaz is as much an exploration into Bono's experience as an unintentional celebrity, as it is the documentation of the impact of his medical transition

⁹² *Becoming Chaz*. Cher comments that she does not personally agree with Bono's decision to conduct his coming out so publicly. She gives no mention that her own enduring fame might continue to impact her son's life and the way in which he must consider handling his transition.

on his personal and public life. For Bono, these aspects of his life cannot be independent of one another. In his memoir, *Transition: Becoming Who I Was Always Meant to Be*, he explains his attempts to juggle his unique experience of the overlapping of private and public spheres of his life; “I felt that if I transitioned I would feel more comfortable in my own skin; but I knew that as a public figure everyone would know I had transitioned, and that would make me feel less comfortable out in the world.”⁹³ The level of scrutiny that Bono has experienced in his life is a completely foreign concept for most people, making the documentation of his transition particularly unique. His fame has, at the end of the day, affected the ways in which he came into his transgender identity and how he has negotiated public interest in his transition and life as a whole.

Aside from his notoriety, there are a few other key components in Bono’s narrative that set him apart from the children featured at the center of both *My Secret Self* and *Born in the Wrong Body: All in the Family*, the most obvious being his age. In his forties, Bono approaches transitioning as an adult. The resistance that Bono is met with has less to do with if he is certain about if transitioning is the right thing. Rather, conflict seems to arise more often around how he chooses to navigate his transition as a public figure and with his partner who expresses her discomfort at being in a relationship with a self-identified man.⁹⁴ Not once in the documentary is Bono asked if he is sure about his transition. Bono is not asked to justify his transition explicitly by filmmakers or other documentary participants, however this does not mean that he is not consistently justifying his right to transition in other ways. His experience with transition is without friction; he is often met with the resistance in the form of being incorrectly gendered by

⁹³ Chaz Bono, *Transition: Becoming Who I was Always Meant to Be* (New York: Plume, 2011), 155.

⁹⁴ Jennifer Elias and Bono have separated since the completion of the documentary.

those close to him. Cher in particular is portrayed as having a difficult time, consistently referring to Bono as “she” and relying on the use of a seemingly gender neutral family nickname. “Da.”⁹⁵

In many ways Cher’s difficulty and hesitance around Bono’s transition works to assist in humanizing the pop idol. Cher, known for her decade-spanning presence in music, her sporadic acting career, and her elaborate fashion choices, is framed as a mother struggling to understand her transgender son. Audiences are given a rare opportunity to find themselves identifying with her. Of course, it is important to note that she is never simply a mother as she never stops being Cher.

Unlike the parental accounts of revelations around their children’s gender non-conforming identity, the audience of *Becoming Chaz* is not privy to Cher’s account of her son’s coming out moment. In contrast to the young documentary participants, there was no conflict in which Bono demanded that he be *allowed* to live his life as he saw fit. As the focus of the documentary, Bono is presented with a certain amount of agency that is not afforded to the participants in *My Secret Self* or *Born in the Wrong Body*. His age and relative financial independence⁹⁶ lends him entitlements to the space to articulate his transgender identity without negotiating what he is *permitted* to do. Many of the children’s stories involved forms of negotiation with their parents about their gender presentation, or their parent’s struggles to negotiate what was occurring with their children. Bono’s participation in the documentary is not about reconciling his transgender identity. There is more of an emphasis on the journey of his medical transition and its

⁹⁵ *Becoming Chaz*.

⁹⁶ Bono does borrow the money for his “top-surgery” from a friend. However this does not negate the fact that he has access to the financial means necessary (formal or informal) to acquire different forms of a medical transition.

impact on his life. Family and friends are represented not as parental facilitators or hindrances throughout the course of the documentary given his independence. Instead, they are presented to audiences as people reconciling forty-plus years of conceiving of, and relating to, Bono as a woman with his current lived-reality as a transgender man. Bono exercised his ability and privilege in making a medical transition, his family must either face it or ignore him.⁹⁷

Another important distinction that plays heavily into *Becoming Chaz* is the way in which Bono relates to his sexuality. Prior to his transition Bono had already been involved in a long-term relationship with Jennifer Elias. Bono's transition broaches the incredibly complex dynamic that can occur in a relationship when a partner transitions. The documentary highlights the difficulty Elias has in confronting and attempting to come to terms with the fact that the woman she initially became involved with eventually came to identify as a transgender man. Sexuality is destabilized through Elias' relation to Bono. Bono consistently reinforces that his attraction to women has been rather stable throughout his life. He contends that his awareness of his sexual preference for women contributed to his ability to push against entertaining any sort of trans identity in the past and led to his previous identification as a lesbian.⁹⁸ Chaz, when he was known as Chastity, was known as a high-profile lesbian. Prior to his transition and subsequent memoir, he co-authored a part-memoir, part-coming out guide, *Family Outing: A Guide to the Coming-Out Process for Gays, Lesbians, & Their Families*. His identification as a

⁹⁷ This is shown to be the case between Chaz and Cher for the majority of the documentary. Their contact is relatively nonexistent and her, at times, simultaneous resistance and acceptance of his transition seems incredibly complicated.

⁹⁸ Bono, *Transition*, 42.

man seems to go hand-in-hand with distancing himself from his prior identification as a lesbian.

In contrast, Elias comments that Bono's transition is difficult for her given that she has not desired to be in a relationship with a man for years but, through the circumstances of Bono's transition, has found herself in one none-the-less.⁹⁹ Through Bono's transition Elias' understanding of her own desire (and potentially her identity as a lesbian) is complicated. He was a publicly known for being the lesbian daughter of Sonny and Cher. Through the course of their relationship she has undergone her own sort of transition. Having entered into what was read as a lesbian relationship in the public eye, she struggles to negotiate her own legibility and identity as her partner asserts his gender and distances himself from the category of woman.

The interactions between Bono and Elias are constructed within the documentary to read as typified clashes between essentialized masculinity and femininity. Elias is often portrayed as being more openly emotional, a stereotypically feminine trait, while Bono is positioned as a largely stoic and reserved masculine counter. In fact, Elias' outwardly emotional performance approaches the territory of being an irrational *lack* of emotional control, dangerously easy to characterize as hysterical.¹⁰⁰ In contrast to her consistent display of emotion, lack of emotional control presented by Bono reads as moments of disproportionate aggression or as Elias terms it, "stubbornness" and "man-

⁹⁹ *Becoming Chaz*.

¹⁰⁰ Hysteria was a diagnosis given to many women as a way to explain a variety of symptoms, all of which were regarded as undesirable in proper women. Treatment of hysteria was historically performed by midwives as physicians saw it as an imposition on their time and medical skills. For greater exploration of the hysterical woman trope, see Rachel Maines, *The Technology of Orgasm: "Hysteria," the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

ness.”¹⁰¹ Such behavior is seen as an expected byproduct of masculinity. Elias’ comment is paired quite intentionally with clips of Bono’s Internist Dr. Richard Horowitz explaining as a medical authority, that the increased assertiveness is the result of hormone treatments.

Claims about the impact of hormone therapy on social identity have been made in the past; these claims are heavily reliant on appealing to socialized norms of how masculinity and femininity function. Serlin notes that in the aftermath of World War II, “[t]he lure of endocrinology’s ability to transform bodies and regulate behavior was clearly a powerful incentive for consumers...”¹⁰² Hormone therapy continues to be regarded as a chemical component of social conduct in transgender bodies. Elias perceives Bono’s new found assertive and at times aggressive attitude to be the fault of hormones. His changed behavior is gendered as masculine and, because of his testosterone regimen, is relegated to being an intrinsic part of his burgeoning manhood. Elias seems to connect this part of his demeanor to an overall shift towards his “man-ness.” For a woman who had not intended to pursue a relationship with a man, such an essential masculinity of a partner’s disposition is portrayed as off-putting, and undesired on Elias’ part.

The discourse throughout the documentary serves to reinforce socially constructed notions about men and women and their interactions with one another, even

¹⁰¹ *Becoming Chaz*. These are terms that Elias utilizes to reference Bono’s increased aggression and shifts in his behavior that she perceives to be a side effect of his transition, specifically his testosterone regimen.

¹⁰² Serlin, *Replacable You: Engineering the Body in Postwar America*, 114. This is an argument that Serlin uses to speak specifically about former Cabaret performer Gladys Bentley’s, assertions that estrogen treatments had corrected her previously deviant sexual behavior. Bentley had originally garnered notoriety in the 1920’s because of her public masculine presentation and reputed same-sex desires.

(or perhaps especially) when the man in question identifies as transgender. The discussion of Bono's authenticity is always hanging in the background. Bono comments that the relationship between himself and Elias was never a typical lesbian relationship, seeming to indicate that there is some sort of essential way of interacting as lesbians. Bono is deploying this casual assessment in an effort to articulate his masculinity. Elias serves to disrupt Bono's claim by pushing against Bono's unspoken stereotyping of lesbian relationships, asking what his statement implies.

Bono's understanding of himself is complex. While in this instance he pushes against reading himself as a lesbian in the past, he disrupts normative readings of his sexuality in others. There is a particular moment during his public coming out as a transgender identified man in which he and Elias participate in a photo shoot. They are intentionally placed in hyper-gendered clothing and role-play. Bono having been warned away from a shirt deemed too feminine in color is wearing a plain blue dress shirt, Elias wearing a ruffled black blouse. Bono poses pouring a cup of coffee, Elias standing to the side kissing his cheek and demurely placing her head on his shoulder. Bono jokes that the moment is "so hetero." While the comment elicits the laughs that Bono had probably intended, the moment takes on a greater importance than a simple throw away joke. Captured in this interaction is a moment of a complex understanding of self for Bono as comfortably straight but uncomfortably "so hetero."

Bono establishes throughout the documentary that he has always felt compelled toward masculinity in his life; even during the time when he was known for being a prominent lesbian figure. However, in this particular instance his and Elias' participation

in the photo shoot does read as particularly “hetero.” The moment was constructed with this goal in mind.

His joke reveals his own awareness that even in this strategic heterosexually constructed moment, his past experience disrupts the intended image. A part of this disruption stems from the fact that “[m]any FTMS do come out as lesbians before they come out as transsexuals (many, it must also be said, do not). And for this reason alone, one cannot always maintain hard and fast and definitive distinctions between lesbians and transsexuals.”¹⁰³ While the photo shoot is intended to convey a heavily heterosexually coded message about how the public should now perceive him, the hard distinctions between Bono’s past identification as a lesbian and his current identity as a transgender man are tangled. Bono, with the knowledge of how he has been perceived in the past, highlights (however unintentionally) the utter queerness encoded in the banal heteronormativity that is expressed during the photo shoot. To speculate as to whether he was pleased by the way that heteronormativity was working to authenticate his own masculinity is beside the point. He understands what it is to be interpreted as resistant to a heteronormative structure, the queerness deploys itself in noting the juxtaposition of his past lived experience against the “so hetero” goal of the photo shoot.

These small moments aside, the majority of the documentary supports and insists on Bono’s trajectory towards embodying an authentic manhood through his relationships and his use of medical technologies such as his chest masculinization surgery, testosterone use, and his research into the potential of having “bottom surgery.” In

¹⁰³ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 150.

centering Chaz's journey around such markers, his narrative in striving towards a more correct becomes not only understandable, but also marketable.

When *Becoming Chaz* is considered in terms of being a product, considering its mode of production becomes crucial to understanding its intended message. Produced by World of Wonder Productions, the documentary was aired on the Oprah Winfrey Network, commonly known as OWN. World of Wonder has a reputation as an especially "gay" production company in the entertainment industry.¹⁰⁴ The two main figures behind World of Wonder, Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato, choose to devote their focus to bringing those on the periphery into mainstream awareness through the projects of World of Wonder. In an article entitled, "Freakshow: World of Wonder is Hollywood's Nuttiest Production Company," published on *Out*'s website,¹⁰⁵ the producers lay out how their production company has come to have a rather infamous reputation in the entertainment industry. World of Wonder is described as specializing in "freaks, outsiders, 16th minute celebrities, conspiracy theorists, penis puppeteers, dictators, street hustlers, porn stars, hackers, homicidal club kids, gender deviants, furies, plushies, and Tori Spelling."¹⁰⁶ The fascination that Bailey and Barbato have with those on the periphery of society is manifest in their films. This fascination, when regarded critically, brings forth the uncomfortable possibility of exploitation. There is a certain amount of privilege that the two head figures of World of Wonder carry as white cis-male producers in the entertainment industry, especially in relation to a good deal of their chosen subject

¹⁰⁴ Natasha Vargas-Cooper, "Freakshow: World of Wonder is Hollywood's Nuttiest Production Company," *out.com*, last modified February 18, 2013, <http://www.out.com/entertainment/movies/2013/02/18/world-wonder-fenton-bailey-randy-barbato>.

¹⁰⁵ A lifestyle magazine intended for a primarily gay and lesbian readership.

¹⁰⁶ Vargas-Cooper, "Freakshow: World of Wonder is Hollywood's Nuttiest Production Company."

matter. Bailey comments on the topic, ““You can humiliate and make fun of the freak – put them in situations that exploit them – or you can celebrate the freak. We celebrate the freak.”” While Bailey’s stance on World of Wonder’s interests can read as complexly queer, it is still being articulated from a relatively privileged position. The adherence to the word “freak” is a personal and perhaps liberatory choice for Bailey and Barbato, but it carries with it a heavy history of ostracization, violence, and pain. The fact of the matter is that World of Wonder operates on the presentation of marginalized peoples and communities for the pleasure of mainstream audiences. After all, at what point does celebration tip into the realms of commodification and consumption?

World of Wonder’s producers position the “freak” as a celebratory figure, as worthy of moving from the margins to the center of an audience’s focus. Bailey and Barbato argue that their attention to and continued focus on marginalized individuals is about the love they always come to foster for their subjects.¹⁰⁷ However, the emphasis on defining the marginalized as freaks and then packaging and selling their stories is troubling.

The image of the freak in American popular culture has heavy historical relevance. Eli Clare notes that American interest in freak shows was the strongest and most widespread from the mid-19th to mid-20th centuries.¹⁰⁸ Audiences “came to gawk at freaks, savages, and geeks. They came to be educated and entertained, titillated and repulsed. They came to have their ideas of normal and abnormal, superior and inferior, their sense of self, confirmed and strengthened.”¹⁰⁹ Clare relays quite beautifully that the education audiences sought at freak shows had less to do with learning about the lives of

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation*, 71.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

the socially othered and far more to do with reinforcing what they already believed to be true about themselves. The construction and commodification of the freak (the other) occurs to strengthen the supposed superiority and values of those who occupy spaces regarded as *more* normative.

To better understand the forces at play in the commodification of the freak, I will utilize bell hooks' reading of the much-acclaimed 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning*, as a model for evaluating *Becoming Chaz*.¹¹⁰ hooks' analysis, written in 1992, detailed the way in which the film fell short of a genuine exploration into the lives of the participants in New York's drag ball scene, serving instead to commodify images of black queer and genderfluid bodies for the pleasure of a white audience.¹¹¹ hooks argued that while the film might be deemed a success due to its appeal to white audiences of the time, understanding its success requires a brutally honest admission that a film featuring queer and gender nonconforming black communities who aspire to reimagine themselves in the image of elite white culture does little to challenge hegemonic power structures.¹¹²

Despite the attitude adopted by audience members about the compelling nature of Livingston's work,¹¹³ hooks cautions against accepting one-dimensional praise, especially when considering the context of the white supremacist culture from which that it arises from.¹¹⁴ Rather, hooks argues "it is precisely the mood of celebration that masks the extent to which the balls are not necessarily radical expressions of subversive imagination

¹¹⁰ There are alternative reads to *Paris is Burning*.

¹¹¹ bell hooks, *Black Looks* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1992), 149.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 148.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹¹⁴ It must be acknowledged that hooks' theoretical framework is not grounded in media studies and that she herself makes no claims of being a media studies scholar.

at work undermining and challenging the *status quo*.”¹¹⁵ Engaging with the idea of ‘celebrating’ marginalized stories is central to understanding the way in which dominant ideas about what is desirable and normative operate. hooks asserts that the acclaim garnered by *Paris is Burning* had far less to do with a celebration of marginalized black drag queens and genderfluid participants featured within the documentary and far more to do with the maintenance of the desirability and superiority of elite white femininity. As hooks goes on to explain, “[w]hat could be more reassuring to a white public... than a documentary affirming that colonized, victimized, exploited black folks are all too willing to be complicit in perpetuating the fantasy that ruling-class white culture is quintessential site of unrestricted joy, freedom, power, and pleasure.”¹¹⁶ Here hooks argues that instead of a celebration of the creativity of predominantly gay black communities, white, well to-do audiences are comforted by the underlying message that their lives and values are, in fact, the pinnacle of success.

For hooks, the drag queens featured in *Paris is Burning* were presented as idolizing and imitating images of elite (and specifically white) femininity. The audience consumed a message about the superiority of white wealth. This message, when delivered through the medium of black queer (largely effeminate) bodies, serves to reaffirm deeply embedded ideas about the worth of specific bodies in American society. Acclaim for the documentary worked, in this context, to maintain the worth of elite white female bodies¹¹⁷ rather than engage audiences in coming to value the black queer bodies that were the supposed focus of the film. The documentary’s participants become secondary within their own lives and Livingston’s narrative, they are seen only in the pursuit of images of

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 149.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 148.

white supremacy. They are represented as striving to pay homage to a ruling class for an audience that would be receptive to those images in the first place.

For hooks, *Paris is Burning* was not about coming to understand or empathize with black queer drag queens and genderfluid communities; it was about consuming a product. The identities of participants and the large ball scene became oddities to be packaged and consumed. hooks summarizes that the documentary makes it possible “for whites to appropriate black culture without interrogating whiteness...”¹¹⁸ The audience is never forced to interrogate the role of dominant white culture in the oppressions faced by the participants of the documentary. The audience is able to celebrate the oddity of the participants through the tokenization of their experiences without ever taking into account the very real systemic pressures that have been produced by white supremacy in the first place.

While I agree with hooks’ reading, more recent media scholarship has pushed back against the perception of *Paris is Burning* as a completely exploitative film. hooks’ analysis did not account for audience reception.¹¹⁹ Representations of marginalized black and brown gender non-normative identities were still presented to audience members who otherwise might have not have seen themselves represented in the mainstream.

In approaching *World of Wonder* with a framework shaped by hooks’ method of critique, Bailey’s desire to ‘celebrate the freak’ reveals more than just an intention to pay attention to marginalized and sensationalized experiences. Rather, what becomes obvious is the privilege that both Bailey (as a cisman) and audiences enjoy when they are asked to

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 154.

¹¹⁹ For more on critiques on hooks’ lack of consideration of issues regarding audience reception see Lucas Hilderbrand, *Paris is Burning: A Queer Film Classic* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2013). Hilderbrand’s critique on hooks’ reading of *Paris is Burning* was brought to my attention after the completion of this thesis.

consider transgender identities and narratives. What becomes obvious is the privilege that comes with the ability to pinpoint the supposed ‘freak’ and label them as such.

Trans bodies as freakish bodies are interesting for the idea of choice that plays into trans identities. While incredibly painful, there is the possibility of ascribing to normative attitudes of the supposed alignment of gender and sex. Trans folk often choose to resist these normative expectations for their own happiness. So then, trans folk have exercised a certain amount of agency, of choice, to ascribe to a trans identity. They might choose individually to align themselves with the label “freak,” aware of what Cecile Lindsay would term as “their violation of widely held cultural categories such as those opposing masculine or feminine qualities, or those contrasting virtuous intellectuality with narcissistic corporality.”¹²⁰ While Lindsay is speaking specifically on bodybuilders when deploying this analysis, bodybuilders, similarly craft their bodies in ways that are perceived as unnatural. They, like trans folk, are very intentional in their violation of what constitutes normative bodies. Assertions of what is natural and what is a choice structure conversations about their bodies. Individuals can align themselves with a celebrated identity as a freak, but the category takes on a far more insidious judgment when applied to their bodies from an audience that prefers normative conformity while indulging and consuming non-normative performance.

Becoming Chaz is a product that is shaped not just by the events of Chaz Bono’s transition, but largely by its method of production. World of Wonder, in looking to celebrate ‘the freak,’ crafts an idea of the non-normative that is not only offered up for the consumption of largely cisgender audiences, but also serves to affirm dominant

¹²⁰ Cecile Lindsay, “Bodybuilding: A Postmodern Freak Show,” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thompson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 365.

notions of masculinity and femininity. The celebratory component of regarding marginalized communities is strongest when it reinforces the domination of normative notions about society and the way it works. Audiences who belong to a more privileged position are able to applaud representations of marginalized others if these representations are satisfactory to the status quo. hooks saw this in her appraisal of the both public and critical acclaim behind *Paris is Burning*. I see a similar underlying current that plays into applauding *Becoming Chaz*.

Wrong Body as the Right Formula

Throughout all three programs the rhetoric around wrong bodies is consistent to the point of being insistent. These documentaries are recent installments, situated within a longer legacy of media interactions with trans narratives. While there has been a noticeable shift away from demonizing trans bodies, the ways in which we continue to talk about trans identity and the way it looks still linger well within the realm of cisnormativity.

The first openly self-identified transsexual American, Christine Jorgenson walked this particular path in the aftermath of her publicized post World War II medical and social transition. Jorgenson proved to be a figure far ahead of her time in her articulation of identity. She went from the height of popular acclaim to the lows of wide-scale derision as the public came to understand that the physical terms of her transition did not meet normative understandings of what constituted true female identity. Namely,

Jorgenson had not yet undergone genital surgery and did not possess a vagina.¹²¹ This particular bit of information led to the vanishing of media's celebratory attitude that had welcomed Jorgenson upon her return from her treatments in Denmark and was "replaced by the sober pronouncements of medical science."¹²² Jorgenson went from being a celebrated¹²³ self-made woman to being relegated to the territory of a failed and castrated man.¹²⁴ She became a fraud almost overnight "when medical experts intervened to demystify the tenets of Jorgenson's womanhood for popular audiences."¹²⁵ This process of demystification created her body's deviance for the public.

In a similar fashion, the transgender participants of these contemporary documentaries are constituted as authentically transgender through the intervention of medical experts. Medical science, in contrast to Jorgenson's story, works not by performing the surgeries and prescribing the hormones that construct *failed* men and women, but rather constructs alternatively successful men and women. Medical experts now serve as the authority to be relied upon to bolster the authenticity of transgender identity, not to reveal them as being in any way fraudulent.

Medical intervention in the transition process, hormones in particular, is heavily referenced throughout all of the documentaries as giving the participants *more* correct bodies. Medical intervention is framed as a necessary (or at the very least expected)

¹²¹ Serlin, *Replaceable You*, 184. Jorgensen would go on to have genital surgery in 1954, two years after her American debut and too late to save her claim to authenticity in American popular opinion.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Again the term "celebrated" makes an appearance. Jorgensen's transition poses as another point in the contention between celebration and consumption. Her early acceptance and subsequent fall from grace was a trajectory captured and carried out by interpretations of medical experts in popular media. Both her fame and infamy were instigated by media attention.

¹²⁴ Serlin, *Replaceable You*, 184.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 185.

measure in the wrong body narrative. Serlin notes that “[i]n the United States and other modern nations, hormone treatments were more than techniques of social control... they had become technologies used for matching one’s physical body to one’s idea of self.”¹²⁶

While Serlin is speaking more directly about the broad consumer appeal of hormone treatments in the mid-twentieth century, his assessment still rings as familiar in today’s conversations about hormones. Bono certainly seems to support it when he comments in the aftermath of his chest reconstruction that he is “finally living in [his] body.”¹²⁷

Transgender bodies and their access to a publicly acknowledged and authenticated gender comes through a medically approved journey marked by diagnosis, treatment, and as Christine Jorgenson painfully came to understand, surgery. Media representations often require that the journey be monitored. This voyeurism is most commonly manifested in a “before and after” journey, marked by the representations of the trans participants pre-transition. All the documentaries were marked by the persistent occurrence of older pictures and film that show bodies before their transition process. For some of the participant who had yet to begin a hormone regimen, this meant pictures from periods when their parents still regarded them as the gender they were assigned at birth. For the young MTF participants who were still pre-pubescent, this meant family pictures and home movies with short hair and sports themed clothing. All of the FTM participants involved in the documentaries had begun or were well into the process of a testosterone regimen at the time of their participation. Representations of their pasts often included longer hair, feminine children’s clothes, and less facial hair. Audiences are

¹²⁶ Ibid., 135.

¹²⁷ *Becoming Chaz*.

expected to ground their understanding of the person they are being presented through some acknowledgement of the type of person they were once regarded as.

For former the masculine cabaret performer Gladys Bentley, hormones worked to authenticate her embodiment of the feminine in a Cold War era that demanded conformity. Bentley utilized the rhetoric surrounding hormones to allow herself the chance to break with her well-known past in Harlem as an out lesbian.¹²⁸ Bentley set about reshaping her body and rehabbing her reputation to allow her the possibility of belonging to “a respectable socioeconomic niche recognized by the black middleclass mainstream.”¹²⁹ Serlin deconstructs a picture that was included alongside Bentley’s triumphant return to femininity in a tell-all article in *Ebony*. In the photograph Bentley poses with a scrapbook of her lesbian past in Harlem. She had since publicly declared that estrogen treatment had righted her from her previous non-normative sexual behavior. Serlin comments that “[a]lthough the photograph suggests a nostalgic walk down memory lane, it also affirms the necessity for Bentley to use ‘before’ and ‘after’ images to underscore her claim that estrogen treatments transformed her from bulldagger to superwife.”¹³⁰ Parallels must not be hastily made between Bentley’s experience and the experience of the participants featured throughout the chosen sample of documentaries. Bentley contended with the pressures of existing as a black woman with a history of sexual non-conformity in a time of extreme political and culture pressure. Her experience in utilizing hormone therapy to realign her image came about in context of her historical moment and her racial identity.

¹²⁸ Serlin, *Replaceable You*, 156.

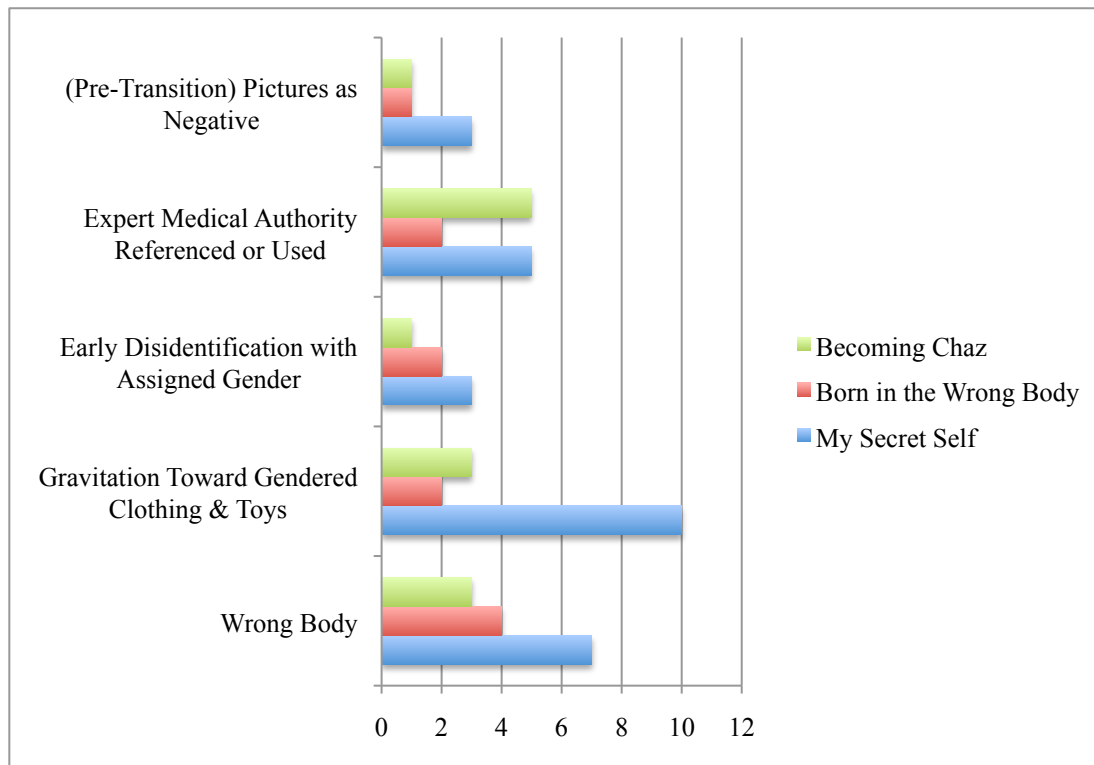
¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 157.

It is the method that Bentley used to affirm her femininity that I find particularly salient. The use of “before and after” is still very much in play. All three documentaries make use of it when discussing the terms of transition. The method operates in the same way as it did during Bentley’s interview in the 1950’s. Much as it served to underscore Bentley’s coming into a feminine and domesticated space, so too did it serve to convey that the participants in front of the cameras were no longer (if they ever were) the individuals in the old photographs and home movies.

The lens of the wrong body makes it incredibly difficult for the participants as they appear in the documentaries to be understood alongside the images of their lives in their assigned genders. The moments in which older photographs are brought out discussed are often marked by the distance that the participant puts between the person in the photograph and the person they feel themselves to be. Hormones and other forms of medical introduction serve as a piece of evidence for audiences, reassuring that the journey will inevitably come to rest within the dominant gender binary.

Trans Narrative Tropes



Portrayal of transgender bodies has deviated very little from the mid-twentieth century rhetoric around utilizing medical technology to facilitate inner perceptions of self. The use of generalized shorthand places a pattern on trans narratives, effectively transforming them for the consumption of audiences. Transition and transgender identity becomes marked by reoccurring themes. Much as the “before and after” trope persists to authenticate the journey of gender, all three documentaries rely on similar themes to make sense of and categorize transgender experiences.

By noting the recurring themes that were utilized in the documentaries I compiled the above graph to indicate how often each program relied on these generalized themes. The fact that these themes presented themselves across all three documentaries indicates a formula that has manifested in media portrayals of transgender narratives.

While the frequency of deployment may vary, it is apparent that there are, in fact, standardized ways in which to tell a trans narrative through televised media. While the inclusion of trans narratives proves heartening for a marginalized community, the process of publicizing and legitimating these experiences has come at a cost. The narratives that are offered serve to re-inscribe problematic dichotomies and structures of normalization, both in the content of the narratives and in the ways that these narratives are told.

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