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# Transqueer Representations and How We Educate

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*This article examines the representations of transqueers (specifically female to male transsexuals) in popular media and how these representations shape attitudes of transqueers both with those outside the LGBT community and those within the community. The article discusses how these cultural images of FTM transqueers imply that being accepted often means surgery and hormones in order to “pass” as male, and it challenges educators to work more overtly and diligently to educate toward critical consciousness regarding the sex/gender system and the rigidity of the binary that removes transgendered people as nonentities. The article offers an argument about how to approach these discussions with students and what texts will complicate the sex/gender binary as it is presented to us via the media representations of transqueers.*

## **KEYWORDS**

*Gender, media, representation, sexual identity, transgender, transqueer*

When I was a graduate student in the late 1990s, I took a lesbian literature course. I was so disturbed by the retributive and punitive endings to many of the texts that we read that for my midterm project I rewrote the ending to *The Well of Loneliness*. In my ending, instead of the protagonist offing herself in an act of desperation, grief, and despair, I had her gathering her life around her, facing the future with hope and strength, and walking into the rest of her life with a “fuck you” attitude regarding homophobia. During this time I was an out and proud queer living in a liberal Midwestern community, surrounded by feminist friends, politicians, and educators.

I would rail against the television show *Ellen* because I was impatient with Ellen Degeneres’s lack of willingness—or what I saw as lack of ovaries—to come out as a proud lesbian. I was annoyed that most people outside of the lesbian community who I talked to were resistant to the idea that Rosie O’Donnell could be a lesbian and I was infuriated with O’Donnell’s ongoing banter about her crush on Tom Cruise during her talk show.

Fast forward 10 years. Both Ellen and Rosie are out and proud. Hurrah! *Brokeback Mountain* was a sensation, a love story of two men, but still the tragic ending echoing *The Well of Loneliness*. Having charged through my PhD and tenure, I am now teaching in a midsized state university in the Midwest. I find my students less homophobic than their peers of 10 years ago. I regularly teach queer texts, and we view films featuring queer topics and characters in my class, but what I started to notice was, although media representations of gays and lesbians seems to be moving in the right direction, the representations of transqueers (transgendered people, transsexuals, and all others who reject the male/female, feminine/masculine gender system) are problematic. The transqueer representations harkened back to *The Well of Loneliness*. They are often portrayed as freaks or dysfunctional and confused. They are lonely, ostracized, and punished (raped, murdered) for their transgressions against the gender system. As film and television are a primary way that people shape their attitudes and beliefs within a culture, as an educator, I work to present transqueer topics and texts in my classroom, asking students to think further

about what they are consuming and question how the media representations of transqueers dehumanize everyone who is making their way outside of the gender system.

The short and tragic life of Brandon Teena, a transqueer who lived and died in the state where I live, is a testimony to the vexing portrayal of transqueers in the media. Teena (born Teen Brandon) grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska, and as a young adult transitioned into living as a male, renaming himself Brandon Teena.<sup>1</sup> Teena moved to Falls City, Nebraska, where he dated women and passed as a man. When his “true” gender identity was revealed by two young men, the men raped and less than a week later murdered Teena along with two of his friends. At the time of his murder, the media and law enforcement couldn’t decide whether to call Teena a he or a she, even though Teena had consistently maintained a male identity as a young adult. Even the *Village Voice*, which sent a reporter to Nebraska to cover the story, couldn’t decide whether to refer to this person with the female or male pronoun in their lengthy article about the murder. The tenor of many articles—and one could argue even in Kimberly Pierce’s (1999) film *Boys Don’t Cry*, based on the tragedy of Teena’s life and death—was of the ilk of “she lied/she died.”

The representation of Brandon Teena and his life and death is just one example of how transqueers are portrayed as tortured, unhappy, confused freaks by the media. Pierce does a good job of creating a sympathetic character in *Boys Don’t Cry*, yet there is considerable time spent showing the audience Teena’s body and how he “transforms” his body into something that passes for male, the subtext being that he really *isn’t* a man, just a woman dressing rather convincingly as a man. Teena’s breast binding becomes the primary act of deception. The first scenes in the film show the deception taking place as acts of getting a short haircut, stuffing his jean crotch, and eventually binding his breasts. As Melissa Rigney writes in her analysis of the film, “The opening scene (when Brandon is escaping homophobic comments) implies that Brandon’s cross-dressing is a symptom of internalized homophobia” (Rigney, 2003, p. 13). Is binding an attempt to escape

homophobia or is it an attempt to escape misogyny, the highly sexualized coding of the female breast? There are two scenes in the first 30 minutes of the film that show the “transformation” from a female body to a body that is made to *look* male, but many in the audience will see these acts as deceptions or performances instead of identity issues. Annabelle Wilcox, analyzing the film through a queer theory lens, writes,

Mainstream readings of Brandon’s life include: a cross-dresser who is “found out” ... a butch lesbian who could not come to terms with her sexuality (*or gender?*); a transsexual man who had not yet undergone surgery or hormone therapy. The issue at stake in these readings seems to be the validity of Brandon’s male gender identity in the light of his biology that, under the traditional binary understanding of gender, sex and the body, seemed to contradict his gender identity. (Wilcox, 2003, p. 413 *italics mine*)

The complexities of transqueer identity are reduced to a lesbian gone too far: a woman who is acting too male. Kimberly Pierce, the director, has said she wanted two possible readings of the film to be left open to the viewer to decide, but the film inscribes the belief that gender and sex are intrinsically linked (Wilcox, 2003, p. 421). Rigney, in her analysis of the film, questions whether Pierce erases a queer identity by creating a character that would be seen as any guy trying to get the girl. Pierce’s primary audience needed to be straight people in order for the movie to be a success, an audience that firmly ascribes to gender/sexuality binaries and mores.

The *Boys Don’t Cry* audience sees the process by which Teena goes through to “dress” as a male within the first 20 minutes. A few minutes later, the audience is shown a meticulous scene of breast binding, again an attempt to *show* how it is done. We, the audience invested in the rigidity of the gender system, need to *see the body*. We must see the naked female body, identified by breasts, and how these breasts are seemingly removed

with ace bandages. Breasts (highly sexualized in the North American culture) are the defining mark of femaleness, of sexualized femininity. Viewing the breast binding shows us how the character attempts to erase *her* femininity, attempting the transformation to a masculine female (but never a transqueer). Jamie Stewart, analyzing how trans characters are portrayed on lesbian films and television such as *Better Than Chocolate* and *The L Word* found that there is a lot of attention given to how the character dresses: "Clothing for the transgendered people can be seen as a barrier between bodies and the rest of the world" (Stuart, 2006, p. 218). The characters conceal the body in order to display a rigid gender identity as either masculine or feminine, but to the viewing audience, the body is always revealed so we can see the "true" sex/gender of the character, reinscribing a rigid gender binary. The other way in which the media reinforces the gender binary for transqueers is by showing that only transqueers who take hormones and spend money on body reconstructive surgeries are ever "at home" or complete in their bodies. If my students are not aware of the Brandon Teena a story and *Boys Don't Cry*, they are more aware of *Transamerica* (Tucker, 2005). In the film, Felicity Huffman plays Bree, a transqueer who is attempting to jump through the final hoops before her transition surgery. As part of this process, she wants to reconnect with a son she abandoned. In the process of finding the son (a homeless youth in New York City who turns tricks to survive), Bree deceives her progeny into believing she is a harmless churchwoman and together they set off on a cross-country trek back to California. The transqueer in the film is portrayed as neurotic, unstable, a liar, and unable to confront her child directly, thereby engaging in many levels of deception. She's a pathetic freak who most in the audience would probably be hard pressed to find sympathy for. Yet, many queers found the film revolutionary: at least there was *some* representation of transqueers in the media. But the

image put forth by the film was, if not minstrelizing, then stereotypical.

In *Transgeneration*, a Sundance Channel production of eight episodes, four young transqueers are profiled (Simmons, 2005). *All of them*

are in a state of surgical or hormonal transitioning. There is no question or discussion about whether there is a way to exist happily as a trans person without surgery and hormones. The body *must* match the gender. Although there are no breast binding scenes in *Transgeneration*, the young (late teen and early 20s) people who are profiled must “pass” as male or female, and the only way to do that is via hormones and surgery. The surgery and hormones are seen as a way of, as Lucas, a female transqueer at Smith College, articulates it, “allowing my body to reflect who I am” (Simmons, 2005). Gabbie, a male transqueer at the University of Colorado–Boulder, echoes this when she says, “The surgery is really important to me because I just want my body to match my mind” (Simmons, 2005). Both these young people are reflecting the belief that there is only one way to be in the world: a masculine male and a feminine female. If one is too masculine, their gender doesn’t match their body—or their true self—therefore their body must be surgically corrected. Instead of creating a trans identity that is resisting or bucking the gender system, these representations of trans identity reinforce the idea that there is no such thing as “trans” people who are healthy and happy with who they are. They *need* surgery and hormones to “correct” who they are, soldiers of the gender system.

The representations of queers in the media become a cultural history and therefore are very important not only in shaping contemporary attitudes but in recording a history of the politics of queer identity and political issues. These representations of transqueers, in other words, create models for not only the nontrans people watching but of the trans people who consume this media. To be trans today now means to be pre-op or post-op. There is no longer room for “transgendered” in the sense of someone who is comfortable with their body and gender *as is*, a transqueer who embodies various places on the continuum of sex and gender. If one is masculine, one must be male; if one is feminine, one must be female. The media creates this reality for the viewing audience. It is a record of the moment of how we view trans people in our culture. Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed (2004) investigated

the cultural memories of what is “queer.” In history classes there is no mention of Stonewall, the meaning of pink/black triangles during the Holocaust, or the homosexuality of historic figures (p. 158). And even if parts of queer history are mentioned, they tend to focus on tragedies such as Harvey Milk, Matthew Shepard’s murder, and AIDS. Because there is rarely any formal mention of queer history and politics in formal schooling, people are educated to queer culture, history, and identity through the media (Castiglia & Reed, 2004, p. 159). Castiglia and Reed argue that situation comedies of the 1970s on television have gone where the news will not go (*All in the Family*, *The Jeffersons*, *Green Acres*), shows that dealt with bigotry, racism, class, the Vietnam War, and women’s rights (p. 160). Television connects with the personal (with tight shots and focusing on private lives). Castiglia and Reed write, “Mass media allow audiences to share intimacy without familiarity and to create new memories—and hence identities—from seemingly impersonal and specularized encounters” (Castiglia & Reed, 2004, p. 162). Castiglia and Reed point to *Will and Grace* as an example of a show recently educating to gay culture and history. In the same way that Ellen Degeneres’s shows share inside jokes or nods to queer history with her queer audiences, *Will and Grace* included “rich resources of gay memory” (Castiglia & Reed, 2004, p. 159). The character of Jack presents gay subculture as a pleasure whereas Will seems isolated from gay subculture (a neutered gay). The show was immensely popular with queer audiences because we hungered for the “normal” queer (or at least the funny, happy, out queer). *Will and Grace* portray a family and gay culture in a positive way, but it didn’t politicize or complicate the representation. The viewers needed to be active consumers and make these sorts of political connections on their own (Castiglia & Reed, 2004, p. 182). Similarly, today’s representations of transqueers need to be consumed critically. Thus, it is important for educators to teach students how to be critical consumers of these queer texts in popular media.

## **TELEVISION AND FILM AS EDUCATORS**



Scholars in the fields of communication and mass media have long argued that television (and by extension film) are compelling educators of children. But beyond face-value educational ends, these media sources also shape culture and teach people how to act and react in social institutions. Gordon Berry, a scholar in media studies, examined representations of African Americans across the history of television (Berry, 1998). He outlined three different time periods that reflected the dominant (Anglo) culture's changing attitudes and beliefs about African Americans. According to Berry, the pre-civil-rights era represented negative depictions of African Americans (savage African, derogatory racial caricatures, happy slave, superior athlete, mental inferiors). Even today we have these stereotypical representations in film and television (the welfare queens, pregnant teen, the public housing dweller, the violent gang bangers, the dropout, the academic failure). The second iteration of representation was during the heart of the civil rights movement, the 1960s to 1980s: "ghetto comedy" of African American life with shows such as *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, *The Jeffersons*, *Julia* (single mother/nurse). Since the 1990s, Berry has identified media representations where African American families are isolated from African American culture and other families or where African Americans are either victims or suspects (Berry, 1998). What happens when African American children consume these sorts of representations? They begin to embody/believe/perform the stereotype. Applying this same theory to queer representations, what happens when queer children or children of queers consume stereotypical representations? Even today we have not yet evolved, as a culture, to represent African Americans—or queers—as complex people.

Cedric Clark (1969), one of the first to look at the progression of African American characters on television, published his analysis of television media in 1969 (p. 18). Clark argued that television was used as a social control regarding race. He created three taxonomies of how race is portrayed on television: (a) nonrecognition (characters are seen as the worst forms of humans deserving of subhuman treatment or punishment), (b) ridicule (characters are stereotypes

and typically laughed at or in powerless positions such as servant/slave), (c) regulation (characters are devoted to the maintenance of law and order, either domestically or publicly, such as police, judge, department of defense, detective, nurse, army) (Clark, 1969, p. 20). The result of these representations is “to get Black viewers to identify with the ‘right’ side of society. [I]t may appear ironic, if not tragic, that those who benefit least from society are shown increasingly in roles associated with the protection of society” (Clark, 1969, p. 21). Applying Clark’s theories of race to trans characters, trans characters are predominantly portrayed as needing to reinforce the heterosexual masculine/feminine gender roles in the same way that Blacks are portrayed as reinforcing social systems of power used against them. By doing so, the gender and race systems are left intact and uninterrogated. “Deviants” conform—or even support—the system instead of disrupting it or changing it. This may be one of the reasons why masculine must equal lack of (or bound) breasts in media representations of transgendered females. Masculine bodies must be male, so surgery and hormones are the goal.

Clark and Berry’s research suggests that the progression of how people are portrayed is not necessarily a straight trajectory, nor is it a trajectory from negative/harmful to positive/healthy representations. These representations, nonetheless, form the way the audience thinks about members of the groups represented, but they also defines how members of that group think of *themselves*. Research conducted by Leifer, Gorden, and Graves (1974) found that children’s attitudes about people changed in relation to the television programs they consumed. Their research has been contradicted by recent research by Brigitte Vittrup Simpson. Vittrup Simpson (2007) found that very young children, even when exposed to “multicultural” programming, have internalized racist stereotypes unless they have parents who are actively talking to them about the stereotypes and negating the stereotypes. If what Berry found (stereotypical portrayals of those outside the dominant culture are not lessening only morphing into different, just as damaging, stereotypes) and Simpson found (children need to be more than simply exposed to diverse images to

avoid internalizing stereotypes) is true, we cannot depend on media to educate us to a better future regarding human rights and social justice. We need to teach children—students—to think critically about what they are consuming and offer more complicated representations of nondominant groups. The stereotypes of the hypermasculine or hyperfeminine trans person are the only portrayals seen. In *Transgeneration*, Lucas is portrayed as a consumer of the most graphic porn magazines, *Hustler* and *Penthouse*. At one point, before getting his first testosterone shot, he talks with another transitioning female-to-male friend about how long and big his “dick” will be after he starts taking testosterone. Even as Lucas says, “We both just want to get over the gender shit and move on,” these portrayals suggest that there is *nothing to these souls* other than the gender shit (Simmons, 2005). They are performing the over-the-top stereotype of what it means to be masculine (consumers of porn, fixated on penis size).

Since the 1960s scholars have looked at the role television has played in shaping attitudes toward race and gender roles and most recently toward gays and lesbians. Jennifer Reed, in her analysis of Ellen Degeneres as a primary model for lesbianism in the 1990s, wrote that television is a teacher, communicating how people need to act in social and cultural institutions such as school, church, family (Reed, 2005, p. 24). The danger of this, Reed argues, is that media typically does not interrogate problematic stereotypes or power structures. Reed writes,

Television notoriously does not challenge dominant ideologies very much or very well. And when it does, it usually works to absorb the meanings of these differences in a variety of assimilationist moves that reinscribe the dominant as normative, and “others” as “different.” But it isn’t either/or. Sometimes it reinscribes and sometimes it challenges the stereotypes. (Reed, 2005, p. 25)

In examining the various contexts of Ellen Degeneres (*Ellen* = closeted

les- bian; *The Ellen Show* = being “out”; *The Ellen Degeneres Show* = talk show host who happens to be lesbian) Reed shows that Degeneres, although making several “winks” to her lesbian audience about being lesbian, is neither closeted nor out as long as she is asexual, a neutered lesbian. Reed writes, “She is a lesbian without being a lesbian, or a post-gay lesbian” (Reed, 2005, p. 25).

The audience for these various generations of Degeneres shows is both straight and queer populations. Different populations with few (if any) connections to one another can produce knowledge about one another via television (Hartley, 1999, p. 31). Mass media as an educator, creating connections to groups of people who are very different from one another, can be positive. But when the representations are stereotypical, or in the case of transqueers, freakish and unsympathetic or rigidly cleaving to the gender binary, there are dangers. This dynamic created the media representation of what I refer to as The Great White Queer. Shows such as *Will and Grace*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Queer as Folk*, *Six Feet Under*, and *Broke-back Mountain* limited the audience’s perception of queerness to White, male, gay, and typically feminine. Media representations of White, gay men have flourished in the recent past (Adelman, Segal, & Kilty, 2006, p. 1). But how many of those representations disrupted the belief that gay men are effeminate, fashion conscious, professionals, or an affluent class focused on consumption? Likewise, when looking at representations of transqueer females, we see a stereotype of these people being portrayed as wanting to *be* men or pass as men, via hormones, binding, crotch stuffing, and—the ultimate transformation—surgery. Instead of portraying transqueers as existing between the binary or along a continuum, transqueers are either female (“see her breasts!”) who are trying to “deceive” their audience into thinking they are a man, or they are somehow “a man trapped in a woman’s body” and only surgery and hormones will make them a real man. Neither one of these portrayals embraces a transgendered identity, that of a person who resists reconstruction of their body or a person who is fucking with the gender system

by saying, “I am what I am. *You* deal with *your* discomfort.” In the transqueer portrayals of today, there is no such thing as a transgendered person; there is only pre-operative and post-operative “trannies” (male to female or female to male). Where have all the transqueers gone, the people who are queering the gender system? These media representations perpetuate the idea that there is no other way to be and therefore many young trans people may not understand that there are options beyond surgery and hormones. In *Transgeneration*, Lucas recognizes the dangers and risks of taking testosterone (shorter life expectancy is at the top of the list), but he never seems to contemplate what his life would be if he didn’t transition, if he lived his life without hormones and surgery.

In the introduction to a journal devoted to LGBTQ issues, Adelman, Segal, and Kilty (2006) write, “New research indicates that viewing [shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*] decreases prejudice and develops more positive attitudes towards gay men (p. 1). Positive attitudes toward any group of people who are traditionally marginalized or persecuted is always a step forward, but only when people are seen as individuals instead of a static identity associated with a group marked as outside the norm will we achieve social justice. Only when the rigidity of the gender system is forced to bend will there be room for transqueers. In research focused on homophobia in schools, Adelman and Woods found that although many students wanted to do something about it, they did not have the tools or resources to intervene when they witnessed harassment. This research seems to poke holes in the idea that more queers in the media equates to a better, more accepting culture. Even more problematic is that students perceived teachers as not only *not* intervening but condoning or perpetuating homophobic harassment. This scholarship is echoed by television representations of what Gilad Padva calls “LGBT Bullying” (Padva, 2007). In this research, Padva found that most representations of queers in film and television focus on themes of bullying (harassment, sometimes to the point of death): *Boys Don’t Cry*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *The Truth About Jane*, *Queer as Folk*. In other words, we are out but we are still

in the well of loneliness.

Even as the younger generations' attitudes about queers may be broadened by media representations on television and in the movies, the stereo- typical representations provide a static model to the queer youth of what it means to be queer, and this is especially true of transqueers. In the book *What Becomes You*, Aaron Raz Link writes about being a transqueer youth (he eventually goes through hormones and surgery to transition to male) (Raz Link & Raz, 2007). He compares the identity to that of being a monster because, for him, there were no other options beyond male/female; straight/lesbian. Raz Link writes, "Men and women were *adult* and human and had romances in various combinations. I couldn't be a man in the human world [because he was sexed female], and I wasn't a woman [because he was gendered masculine]. I was a monster" (Raz Link & Raz, 2007, p. 34; emphasis in the original). I know many young lesbians who are smitten with *The L Word*, a successful HBO series featuring a lesbian community in Los Angeles. However, *The L Word* is a parade of "pretty" (high femme) lesbians with lots of plot and some erotic scenes to hold it together. Who is this gaze for? *The L Word* "teaches" viewers that only pretty lesbians are worthy of acceptance and interest. The women portrayed on this show are no different from women on other television shows and in film: thin, ascribing to the beauty aesthetic of Barbie, glamorously dressed, showing lots of skin, lingerie, and performing sex acts for their audience. This becomes the interesting or valued lesbian image that is internalized by the audience, both straight and lesbian. Constance Reeder, in writing for the feminist newspaper *Off Our Backs*, argues that the show is about lesbians throwing themselves on the mercy of men (she points to the story line where a couple resorts to chasing after straight men for their sperm) (Reeder, 2004, p. 51). Reeder writes that the show features mostly heterosexual sex acts or sex acts that are duplicates of scenes found in heterosexual porn where "girl on girl" sex (not to be confused with lesbian sex) is designed to "titillate a heterosexual male audience." Reeder (2004, p. 51) states, "This type of soft porn has been around for a long time and

is more appealing to straight men than to any self-respecting feminist.” *More* representations don’t necessarily mean progress; in evidence of transqueers portrayed in film and television a static stereotype is all we see.

In writing about his own coming out, a student in one of my courses wrote that in an isolated rural town that he grew up in, the only way he knew how to be gay was from watching television. As a result, he wrote that he adopted a higher speaking voice, became interested in clothes and home decorating, and became a gossip. He said that none of these traits were part of who he was before he “came out,” but these traits were a pose he adopted to be more gay. Although many will dismiss this example as anecdotal, I don’t think it is an anomaly, especially for young queers in more rural areas. Raz Link (Raz Link & Raz, 2007) writes about his association with the word “transgender and transsexual” as gleaned from the media. Link states:

As far as I knew a transsexual was a kind of woman. Everything I had ever seen—from *Geraldo* to the latest from the radial queer press—made the gender of transgender very, very clear. Transgender, like all gender, was about women. Women good and bad, real and fake. I supposed there could be ridiculous women who thought a fake mustache was masculine, a corporate monkey suit was powerful, and wearing them was what made somebody a man. Women had strange fantasies about men. No surprise that transsexuals were women. Being a man is for real. (p. 62)

Within the gender system, there is only man or woman. Therefore there is no way to be a transgendered person or even a transsexual. A transsexual is only someone playing at the gender game. Surgery creates the *real* man. Queer youth (and perhaps adults) are seeing media representations as a script to becoming a “real” queer. The Great White Queers are teaching young gay men that being gay means cattiness and consumption, looking and acting the part. And transqueer youth are learning from films, television, and YouTube that one

binds hir breasts only until zhe can gather the funds together for hormones and top surgery; these are necessary markers of their identity as a “FTM” transqueer—and even then that identity is abandoned as quickly as possible for “regular” man/“real” woman. Doctors are reporting that young patients (midteens to early 20s) are coming in for hormones and “sex reassignment” surgery. These have become the coming of age rituals for transqueer youth in our culture. Even the category of “FTM” (female to male) implies that there is no way out of the binary, no way to exist in an identity that is not one or the other. One is a female making hir way *to* maleness. And only once zhe achieves the identity of “male” will zhe have arrived at a culturally acceptable identity. Even as Raz Link writes about his clear and adamant identity as a “man” and not a transqueer, he expresses impatience for the shows that create the identity of “transsexual” as something no one would want to identify with or as. In writing about shows such as *Jerry Springer* and *Geraldo*, Raz Link (Raz Link & Raz, 2007) writes,

What I didn't know then is how carefully images of transsexual bodies are edited out of existence. The producers of these shows are very careful to choose only people who can be easily identified by any casual observer as something *not like us*. Since transsexual men who've had surgery and hormone therapy are indistinguishable from nontranssexual men, the producers were reduced to finding people who, for some reason, lived as men without either surgery or hormones. Not surprisingly, they were defensive, frightened, angry, and looked and sounded just like women. Not surprisingly, I assumed this was all a transsexual man could be; this is, after all, the impression the program was designed to produce—*We're freaks, and we're unhappy, not like you.* (p. 86)

One portrayal of transqueers is unbalanced freaks—someone no one wants to be. The counterrepresentations are one where one must surgically or



hormonally modify her body to be seen as “normal,” as happy, healthy, and well-adjusted. This secondary binary (healthy/happy versus freak/miserable) only serves to reinforce the masculine = man and feminine = woman binary that is at the heart of the patriarchal culture. Is it only a capitalist culture where the identity of man/woman is not only performed through purchase of clothes, makeup, accessories, but is created or constructed through consumption of services provided by medical professionals?

Megan Sinnott (2000) wrote about transgendered identity in Thailand as represented in newspapers. She found that in Thailand, being “gay” is linked to consumerism and capitalism (spending money on clothes and clubs to create a specific image). Being “gay” is seen as a Westernization of Thai culture (Sinnott, 2000, p. 427–28). Although Sinnott’s research focuses on a culture very different from ours, the underlying dynamics are applicable. The Great White Queer represented in the media perpetuates the belief that gay men (and in the context of American television queer = White gay male) are first and foremost hyperaware of fashion, are trendsetters, and spend a lot of money to portray their status as queer. In his analysis of *Queer Eye*, Jaap Kooijman points out that “*Queer Eye* takes [the role of the gay man as a model consumer] a step further by showing the stores where this queerness can be bought ... in this fashionable queer corporate world, there is no place for alternative lifestyles, sexualities, or critical politics” (Kooijman, 2005, p. 107). The show reduces queer identity to a fashionable accessory, not a complex social and political identity. On the show, homophobia is portrayed as a tacit job (straight men expressing discomfort around the gay stars) (Kooijman, 2005, p. 107). In applying this to transqueer identity of a female, she will come to understand from consuming the images of transqueers characters that she needs to try to “pass” as male and that there are various steps to doing so, most of them dependent on money to achieve. Queerness, unlike race, is isolating in that a queer youth may not have any other models of what it means to be transqueer outside of what she can learn from the media.

When thinking about the consumption of media images—and how the

media images perpetuate capitalist consumption to maintain a certain identity—in relation to the process of coming out, it makes sense that these images would have a huge effect on young people. V. C. Cass (1979) outlined the six stages of sexual identity formation: (a) identity confusion (“Who am I?”), (b) identity comparison (may accept their own identity, but still closeted), (c) identity tolerance (see others with similar identity), (d) identity acceptance (shares identity outside LGBT community), (e) identity pride (anger toward heterosexual privilege and submersion in LGBT community), and (e) identity synthesis (identity integrated with other components).

It would make sense, in looking at these stages, during the initial “identity confusion” and “identity comparison” phases, people would look to other queers to see what it meant to be queer. If one were isolated from other out queers due to geography of lifestyle, for example, media would provide the only way in which to examine the way it means to be queer in the world. Unlike racial or cultural identity where a family provides “real” peoples for models, people who disrupt the cultural stereotypes that the child may be consuming, queer youth—and to a greater degree trans youth—often depend totally on external media representations to understand what being queer or trans is. Whereas queers I know who are in their 50s and 60s went to the public library to seek out information on homosexuality, young queers today are more likely to Google, YouTube, Facebook, or tune in to gather information.

The Internet has become a major source of connection for queer youth, allowing them to create a context for queerness that—although still screen-mediated—allegedly allows them to interact with real people as opposed to media created characters. Eve Shapiro (2004), in her research on how the trans community uses the Internet as a tool for organization, found that because of the Internet, transqueers feel less isolated. Before the Internet, transpeople relied on medical professionals and a limited number of trans support groups for information. The medical community advised *not* associating with the trans community after transition (Shapiro, 2004, p. 170). Today, the Internet provides visibility, connection, and organizing for political action, easing the sense of

isolation for trans people. Shapiro writes that the Internet is central to the empowerment of trans subjects (Shapiro, 2004, p. 170). This can be good (communities ease a sense of isolation), but also bad. A screen-mediated interaction is not a human connection. People can also choose to represent themselves online in ways that are very different from their lived reality, creating a false identity or reality. Stereotypes can be reinscribed as well as disrupted. While the Internet allows people to remain anonymous, which can be liberating, anonymity can also be fraught with opportunities for deception. The online communities can create connections but also a false sense of movement size and safety (Shapiro, 2004, p. 175). Shapiro also notes, "The dynamics of race, class, and nation affect who has access to the Internet," and the Internet may even reinforce biases of race, class, and nation (Shapiro, 2004, p. 175). Kate Nash, looking at human rights and issues of diversity, argues that the use of mainstream media is so important to LGBTQ organizations that it cannot be seen as distinct from activist communities (Nash, 2005, p. 336). If, as Nash argues, media representations *are* the new form of activism, shaping public attitudes about queerness, we need to be much more concerned about how the media is representing queers and trans people and how to teach people, primarily our students, to be critical consumers of these images.

## TEACHING QUEER IN THE CLASSROOM

Because television and film are such compelling educators and often educate in ways that reinforce negative or unhealthy representations, educators have an obligation to teach queerness that disrupts the stereotypes or complicates the sex/gender system. As many educators would advocate teaching social mores such as antiracism and antisexism in the classroom and creating a classroom environment where classism, sexism, and racism are not tolerated, so, too, should educators look to their curriculum and classroom as a site of teaching against homophobia and the sex/gender binary. Jonathan Alexander (2008), in his book *Literacy, Sexuality, and Pedagogy*, questions whether, as images of queer become more

mainstream, students are doing the hard work of questioning and interrogating heterosexism and heteronormativity. Alexander writes that we all need a greater literacy about sexuality and be able to talk “fluidly and critically about sex and sexuality” (p. 2). However, in many of the examples he offers, it seems that the sex/gender binary is left unexamined by both teachers and students. Teacher educator Patti Capel Swartz (2003) argues that teacher education programs need to interrogate homophobia and the naturalization of heterosexuality in the curriculum, encouraging teachers to be vigilant about presenting complex portrayals and open discussions about queer identity. As many scholars across the curriculum have argued, the classroom is never a “neutral” space where sexuality is concerned, and teachers have an obligation to their queer students or students with queer friends, relatives, or parents to address issues of homophobia, gender, and queer identity throughout the curriculum in the same way that they address biases of class, race, and sex. Dennis Sumara and Brent Davis (1999) conducted research with educators who identified as gay, lesbian, and transgendered. They found that queer teachers carried the same homophobic/sexist baggage that nonqueer teachers did. Some lesbian and gay educators that I know are closeted in the classroom and therefore avoid any discussion of homophobia out of fear that they will be outed.

My experience of being an out queer in every one of my classes is that there is the potential for the more homophobic students to shut down or exercise active resistance to not only the lessons that list toward a queer or antihomophobia theme but to everything I teach. There are tangible consequences for confronting issues of queerness and homophobia in any classroom, yet this doesn't excuse educators from taking on that work. Mary Bryson and Suzanne de Castell (1993) conducted research involving queer educators in the Canadian public school system. They define queer pedagogy as “a radical form of educative praxis implemented deliberately to interfere with, to intervene in, the production of normalcy in schooled subjects” (Bryson & de Castell, 1993, p. 285, 288) or “teaching against-the-grain ... engage simultaneously with issues of sexuality, identity, difference, agency, voice, and

pedagogy.” This definition does not imply that there is any discussion or inherent need for LGBT issues to be part of the classroom, yet their research focuses on educators that define themselves as queer (regardless of whether they are “out” or not in the classroom). For Bryson and de Castell, queer pedagogy is not about subverting the norm, but going in a completely different direction.

Queer pedagogy could refer here to education as carried out *by* lesbian and gay educators, to curricula and environments designed *for* gay and lesbian students, to education for everyone *about* queers, or something altogether different. Queer pedagogy could refer to *the deliberate production of queer relations and to the production of subjectivities as deviant performances*—that is to say, to a kind of postmodern carnivalesque pedagogy of the underworld, as agitation (*implemented deliberately to interfere with, to intervene in the production of so-called normalcy in schooled subjects*) (p. 299, emphasis in original).

Bryson and Castell found that although some teachers may come out as queer in their classes, they don’t necessarily speak or teach as one. This dynamic suggests that queer pedagogy is more complicated than simply identifying as queer in the classroom. It is more about what and how one teaches, regardless of one’s sexual or gender identity. Many queers (out or not) may be reluctant to teach queer issues or queer their curriculum for fear of encountering backlash from students, administrators, colleagues, or parents. One interesting note about Sumara and Davis’s (1999) research is that they found parents were more willing to have their children experience queer texts/discussions than the teachers anticipated. Parents may want teachers to address these issues because they don’t know how to, which, in the end, is the job of educators.

## **DEFINING AND THEORIZING QUEERNESS**

The field of queer theory and the linguistic reclaiming of the word “queer” to remove the negative stigma are a direct result of both the feminist and LGBT rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Although the Stonewall

Riots in New York City, the event that marked the beginning of the LGBT movement in this country, happened over 40 years ago, the reclaiming of the word “queer” as a positive identity and the burgeoning academic field of queer theory came part of the cultural vernacular during the 1990s. Because the field of queer theory is relatively new, there are many ways that queer theory is being defined. Sumara and Davis (1999) define queer theory as the interrogation of how desire is culturally produced. Others define “queer” as any behavior or ideology that rejects the heterosexual (or dominant) paradigm of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is how the heterosexual culture defines itself as the primary form of human association, the model of cross-gendered relationships. In other words, heteronormativity is seeing straight, reading straight, and thinking straight. Relating this to theories of race and culture, Edward Said has described this phenomena of the dominant ideology permeating one’s conscious and unconsciousness as “the White man on my eyeball” or, as Toni Morrison has described it, “the White man in my head.” According to Janet Halley, in her article “The Construction of Heterosexuality,” queer is a marker that refuses the “heterosexual bribe,” or the cultural perks awarded to those who perform the heterosexual identity. In other words, queer theory is the antidote for heteronormativity, a challenge to the assumptions that infiltrate the culture because of compulsory heterosexuality. A groundbreaking text in the area of queer theory is Eve Sedgwick’s (1990) *Epistemology of the Closet* in which she argues that queerness is fluid, not static; there are queer children who don’t necessarily become queer adults and people who shift in and out of a queer identity during their lifetimes (1990). Queer theory acts to deconstruct dichotomies and binaries, but in a world where binaries and clear taxonomies are valued, this creates ambiguity about what queerness and queer theory is. Taxonomies are problematic (gay, lesbian, trans) because they manifest cultural stereotypes of how a person should act/live. Therefore, many argue “queer” becomes the preferred term because it resists grand stereotypes (Sumara & Davis, 1999, p. 197). As Sumara and Davis argue,

There is a complex and ever-evolving relationship between the biological and the phenomenological, a relationship that always shifts with context over the course of one's lifetime. One's sexuality, from this perspective, is always structured by the various narratives and the experiences of gender, race, ethnicity access to resources, physical capacities, and so on. (p. 196)

Still there seems to be a dominant culture understanding of what queer is, but it is reduced to White, male, gay, effeminate, and the show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* codified that limited definition. Many theorists argue that queer theory is not just about deconstructing binaries of desires, gender, or sexuality, but of deconstructing or "messing with" all distinct classifications. Vera Mackie, writing about transgendered people in Japan, defines the verb "to queer" as "the deconstructive and activist techniques of resisting binary classification systems (not just gender)" (Mackie, 2008, p. 416).

Within the feminist community or even the lesbian community there are some activists and academics who reject transsexual identities as not queer at all because these identities seem to capitulate to a rigid gender system where male = masculine and female = feminine. Judith Butler (1993), the premier queer theorist, has argued that there is nothing queer about transsexuals and puts them outside of the taxonomy of queer because she sees them as capitulating to the gender system instead of queering it. Transsexuals, Butler wrote in her book *Bodies that Matter*, surgically reconstruct their physical body to ascribe to social gender norms that the person manifests. Janice Raymond (1994), author of *The Transsexual Empire*, writes that transsexuals should not be embraced by the feminist community because of the gender binaries they reinforce. Jay Prosser (1998), author of *Second Skins*, complicated Butler's theories of gender. Gender and sexuality are not as simple as being a performance and transsexuals demonstrate this complexity. Prosser wrote, "Queer theory's deconstruction of sex—its representation of sex as 'gender all along'—clearly does not hold for those transsexuals who experience a traumatizing split between their sex and gender, whose goal in seeking reassignment is to align their sex to their gender identity" (Prosser,

1998, p. 319).

I would argue that transgendered people complicate this even more: despite all of the social conditioning, they are adamant that their gender is what it is. It isn't as simple as everyone "putting on" gender. These divides among the lived realities and theoretical schools of queer theory only serve to further "queer" (make a mess of) queer identity. Annabell Wilcox (2003) wrote, "Queer can be academically and politically opposed to transsexual discourse, leading to divisive and dangerous splits that deny the intricate links between transsexual and transgender subject positions" (p. 410). Mary McIntosh (1993) points out that although feminist theory and feminism as a social movement are committed to drawing attention to gender inequities, this approach further codifies the binary thinking of sex versus gender, masculine versus feminine, male versus female. In order to truly queer the culture, we need to think beyond the limitations of these binaries.

In an example of feminist rejection of transsexual queerness, Susan Birrell and Cheryl Cole analyze Renee Richards's representation in the media. Throughout their article they refer to Richards, a post-op transsexual of more than 20 years, as "she/he" without any acknowledgment that this could be considered hostile. Birrell and Cole (1990) write that Richards equated being a "real female" with sexual submission. "By offering his/her body as a source of sexual pleasure for men, Richards apparently believes s/he has been re-sexed as a woman" (p. 10). The inverse may be true of transmales, who are portrayed as sexually dominant as the ultimate resexing, ascribing to the hypermasculine idea of maleness (aggressive, dominate, predatory). Birrell and Cole criticize Richards as a male who is oblivious to systems of sexism and the politics of gender. They write, "Like many transsexuals, (Richards) displays an exaggerated stereotypical notion of feminine behavior drawn from masculine hegemonic notions of gender" (p. 12).

Theorists such as Butler, Radway, Birrell, and Cole believe that transsexuals can remove themselves from the historical context of gender politics; the media reinforces the simplification of the transidentity as an



uncomplicated model of heteronormativity. These scholars suggest that transsexuals such as Richards don't *disrupt* dominant ideology of gender but serve only to reinforce it. According to Birrell and Cole (1990), Richards didn't recognize the systemic oppression of women. She saw it only in terms of what organizations were doing to her. She didn't interrogate how her presences affected the other female athletes and the systems of sexism inherent in the sport/culture. For example, she didn't seem to recognize that being raised as a boy would put her at an advantage in the sport competing against people who were raised as girls (Birrell & Cole, 1990, p. 12). Richards, although not perceived to be hyperfeminine, is portrayed as ascribing to hyperfeminine gender characteristics in order to be seen as a female. In a similar way, divas—the hyperfeminine heterosexual woman—become icons of certain communities in the gay or transqueer (MTF) culture: hyperfemininity is seen as the “true” femininity. Pavda Gilad, in her article “Unruly Womanliness” analyzes cultural divas (presumably heterosexual, highly feminine females such as Barbara Streisand, Cher, Judy Garland, Jennifer Lopez) and why they have a following with gay men. Padva (2006) writes:

At the very heart of gay diva worship, however, is not the diva herself but the almost universal homosexual experience of ostracism and insecurity, which ultimately led to what might be called the aestheticism of maladjustment, gay men's exploitation of cinematic visions of Hollywood grandeur, in particular, to elevate himself above his antagonistic surroundings and simultaneously express membership in a secret society of upper-class aesthetes. . . . These women are considered by their many gay male fans as *camp* icons—fabulous, extravagant, and festive mega-stars—who consciously *play the part* of the “ultimate” femmes, the admired superwoman that reveal the powerful theatricality of gender representations, manifestations, and manipulations in contemporary popular media. (p. 28)

Gender dysphoria, where people find some part of their gender status as difficult to bear, may be at the heart of not only how we see divas and transqueers but the phenomena of forcing transqueers into the either/or

gender/sexuality system. One simply can't be transqueer (someone who rejects the binaries of masculine/feminine and male/female); a person must either be a confused lesbian/gay man, a woman who is "really" a man, or a surgically reconstructed male or female who now abides by the gender system. This representation of transqueers is consistently reinforced in popular media, and educators need to begin teaching critical awareness and analysis of these stereotypes in order to really "queer" them. Raz Link writes about his impatience with people who articulate their surgery/hormones as being "born" again or at last being in their correct body. He writes,

That I got rid of my body rather than getting rid of my discomfort with it is the prime argument used against transsexuality. Do I criticize other people for taking the same route I took myself? But the convenient terms I hear each time my sex change comes up—that my former self "died" and a new one "was born," that I "love my new body," that I was "a man trapped in a woman's body"—all pretend I was two people or have had two bodies. I wonder why it isn't obvious that if I'd dealt with my discomfort by getting rid of my body, I would now be dead. (Raz Link & Raz, 2008, p. 95)

Certainly, Raz Link—and all other post-op transsexuals—did not "get rid" of their bodies, but they reconstruct their bodies so look/feel in ways that more happily match the gender system.

## **SURGERY REQUIRED**

One of the prevalent themes of queers on television and in film is that surgical reconstruction is required of a body where sex and gender don't "line up." In popular media there are no representations of transgendered people who are *not* in the process of having surgical modification of their bodies. This reinforces the gender/sex binary where there is no space to be truly transgendered in the culture, meaning persons who are rejecting gender roles and stereotypes, people who are content with their gender expression regardless of whether or how it matches (or doesn't) their biological sex. On *The L Word* we have Moira/Max, a androgynous-looking, butch(ish) lesbian who

decides she wants to transition to be a male through hormones and surgery (Robinson, 2006). One episode has her discussing, with an African American character, why she feels the need to transition, or rather she is getting annoyed with the African American woman because Moria/Max feels she needs to explain *why* she wants to transition. It is an interesting exchange where the African American character asks her whether Moira/Max would support her decision to become White if she could, but the question is left hanging and the complex politics of choosing to become “male” via hormones and surgery are left fully unanswered or interrogated.

On many shows or films that feature FTM transqueers, there is the constitutive breast binding scene. We need to see how the breasts are made to disappear so that the individual can pass for male. As with the film *Boys Don't Cry*, these breast binding scenes are a way of reinforcing the cultural belief that breasts are the quintessentially female body part, sexualized and on display, and so they are problematic for females who identify as masculine. Breasts are the marker of female desire and sexuality toward and for males. In the rigidity of the gender system, female sexuality is reserved for heteronormative, male–female relationships. Therefore, the breasts must go. In an episode of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, a show allegedly about “making over” straight men, a transgendered female is featured (Collins, 2006). There is much ado about what and how Miles intends to proceed with hir transition to pass as a male, and at one point in the show zhe is asked to show the audience how zhe binds her breasts with ace bandages. Zhe complies by pulling up hir shirt so the audience can see her bandages and breast-flattening sports bras.

The audience needs to know how the breasts are removed, what “trick” is being performed. We are not content to see Miles as masculine, hir natural or chosen gender expression. We must see that her body is made to “act” male, even if it is not. We want to see *how* zhe tricks us into seeing her female body as male. In other words, these breast binding scenes reinforce the belief that there are really only two sexes/genders and transgendered persons are just performing an illusion to pass as something they are not. The subtext of using a

bandage, something that we see as healing a wound, is also interesting. Are these people (these females) *wounded* by their gender expression? The use of a bandage to bind their breasts would offer that analogy: the breasts are a wound or things that are broken on the body and therefore have to be bandaged. The breast binding scene on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* is out of place in a show that is supposed to focus on makeovers of straight men. But perhaps that is how the audience is asked to see Mile's body: she is simply engaging in a makeover, as one would with wardrobe or an apartment. These breast binding rituals are seen as fodder for public consumption, putting the FTM body on display, creating a freak show out of these bodies as opposed to accepting the ambiguity of gender identity.

If one searches "breast binding" or "top surgery" on YouTube, one will be rewarded with a plethora of home videos by young FTM transqueers who engage in public unveiling of their chests, post-op. Many chronicle in detail the transition from breast-binding to surgery to postsurgical healing. The display of the postsurgery "man chest" is acutely important in these clips. The unveiling, the display are ways to show the world that these people are really men because their breasts are gone. There is little, if any, discussion of hormones or genital surgery. The important marker of femininity is breasts, so the important marker of masculinity is lack of breasts. The FMT transqueers primp and pose with their new top in masculine muscle poses. They are proud to be finally fully masculine by virtue of having their breasts removed. There is little or no commentary on why this surgery is important to their identity and no theorizing about what it means to be transsexual as opposed to transgendered or why surgical modification of their body was necessary to feel "at home" in their body. The audience who views these shows and clips are not called on to challenge thinking about the gender/sex binaries that put pressure on these individuals to surgically modify their bodies. The audience becomes a voyeur in the transqueers surgical transformation without questioning why the surgery or binding is needed and how these acts may be damaging to a person's body or psyche.

The documentary *Boy Am I* is an excellent antidote to the simplistic view of

transqueers and breast bindings/surgery reinforced by the media (Feder & Hollar, 2006). In this documentary, the filmmakers profile three young FTM transqueers at different stages in their transformation. But they don't stop with the scenes of breast binding or postsurgical displays (although these constitutive scenes also exist). They complicate the issues of sex, gender, binding, hormones, and surgery by talking to feminist and queer theorists as well as feminist and queer activists. These voices complicate the issue and cause the audience to think about questions such as why people feel the need to use hormones and surgery to modify their body to match their gender expression. There are no answers offered, but the critical thinking involved in picking through the questions offer a much more complicated discussion. When I have shown this film in class, after watching some of the pop culture representations of transqueers, my students are stunned by how differently they react to the transqueers in this film compared to the images offered on the media they are accustomed to consuming. The issues about what it means to be gender different suddenly become more complicated and heart wrenching. My students can no longer view the people as freaks but as complex individuals struggling to find a place where they feel good about themselves in a gender-obsessed culture. Issues of race, class, and age also complicate these issues, and the filmmakers do a brilliant job of including these topics in the discussion.

Interesting, too, is hearing the transqueers attempting to rationalize or describe why they feel they need the hormones and surgery. Most interesting is Keegan, who, at the beginning of the film, is certain that zhe does not have any need for hormones or surgery, although zhe does bind hir breasts (describing it as an excruciatingly painful process). By the end of the film, however, Keegan is clearly using hormones and is talking about surgery. Zhe doesn't articulate why zhe feels the need to make the transition or what has changed since she began talking to the filmmakers. I find that this offers a great jumping off place for discussion in class: what changed her mind? Could it be the culture of media and YouTube that creates the need? Young transqueers

come to understand that these are part and parcel of the identity because they are not other representations easily available. They don't see transgendered warriors such as Leslie Feinberg as part of their culture or their generation, *if* they see Feinberg at all. Why do people feel pressured to seek surgery and hormones instead of being in their "natural" state? Connections can be made to breast augmentation for heterosexual women or other types of surgical modifications, fostering a rich discussion of the complexities of the issues. I always ask, "If the culture did not demand rigid gender categories and features (females must have/be X; males must have/be Y), would anyone feel the need for surgery and hormones?"

Other films that allow teachers to deconstruct and complicate what it means to be outside the gender/sex binaries are the Australian documentary *Black and White* and the French feature film *Ma Vie en Rose (My Life in Pink)*. *Black and White* profiles Mani Bruce Mitchell, a 50-something transqueer who is comfortable in her body and believes it is important to not surgically modify or hide who one really is (McDonald, 2006). Mitchell was born intersexed and at first assigned a sex of male and then reassigned as a female. *Zhe* talks candidly with the filmmaker about hir own struggles with hir body and identity as a child, young adult, and now aging adult. *Zhe* discusses hir shock of hair on her chin, long and wiry-grey, as an act of resistance, an activist, pro-queer way of being in the world and in her body. The profile of Mitchell both clarifies multifaceted perspectives involved in trans identity as well as complicates the dominant film and television representations of transqueers.

Likewise, the film *Ma Vie en Rose* creates a whimsical and heartfelt narrative about a small child who is born male but adamant that he is actually a she (Berliner, 1997). In this touching story, set in Belgium, it is not the child who is gender-confused (he is very clear on what his gender is) but his parents and neighbors. The depth and complexity of the film shows how parents are the first ones who gender imprint a child and how transgendered children are a disruption to *their* (parents'/family's) lives more than the

identity is confusing or disruptive to the child. In other words, the child in this film is not portrayed as a freak of nature but only a child whose *parents* are unsure of how to approach and nurture someone outside of the dominant gender system. This film would have never been made in America's Hollywood because it does not portray trans identity as either freakish, abnormal, or comical. Thus the film serves as an excellent counterargument to the American and Hollywood representations of queerness, particularly addressing the myth that people turn out to be "confused" about their gender because of a dysfunctional family or other childhood trauma. The child in *Ma Vie en Rose* is raised in a loving and very typical nuclear family, each member in turn coming to terms, in different ways, with the transgendered child.

Another film that complicates the North American stereotypes of queerness is the documentary *Transparent*, which profiles 10 different transqueer parents (Roskam, 2005). The people profiled were all born female. Some have gone through hormone and surgery; some are transgendered. They were all raised as girls and talk about their lives not only as transqueers but about when and how they came to identify as something outside the identity of "girl" or "woman." They talk about the struggles of raising children and how they talk to their children about their own gender or how they talked to their children about their transition from female to male if they underwent hormones and surgery. The film portrays these parents as "typical" in how they love and nurture their own children, yet they are outside the norm because they are not heterosexual and gendered as feminine females. Some of these parents' children refer to them as "mama" even if they are passing as male or have transitioned to male. Some of the children make the transition to calling their parent "father," but throughout the film the complexities of how and why these decisions are made is discussed by those involved. The diversity of age, culture, and family type represented is impressive, as is the sensitivity with which the filmmakers approach these individuals, parents, children, and families.

Alisa Lebow's wonderful short documentary, *Outlaw*, allows Leslie Fein-

berg to tell her own story and theorize about the gender system and her identity as a transgendered warrior (Lebow, 1994). The film's primary voice and focus is Feinberg, providing essential history as well as smart theory from Feinberg. There is footage of Feinberg and her partner, Minnie Bruce Pratt, relaxing, playing, and talking about being a transcouple. Paired with Feinberg's Web site (<http://www.transgenderwarrior.org/>) or Feinberg's novel *Stone Butch Blues* (Feinberg, 2003), students will interrogate the gender system and how one can exist outside that system. Feinberg consistently provides a model of what it means to be transgendered, a transqueer who has rejected hormones and surgery to be in her own body, to own her body, outside of the constraints of the gender system.

By using films such as *Transparent*, *Black and White*, *Boy I Am*, *Outlaw*, and *Ma Vie en Rose* in curriculums, educators can present various alternative perspectives on what it means to be queer and educate students against the dominant narrative of queers as freaks with damaged psyches who need to be surgically corrected to "pass" as normal. The dominant belief perpetuated by most, if not all, television shows and films, is that transqueers are simply born in the "wrong body" and therefore must have this corrected with hormones and surgery in order to pass as "normal." Films such as *Outlaw*, *Ma Vie en Rose* and *Black and White* call into question the theory that one can be born into the "wrong" body. *Rather one is born into a culture that is intolerant of the natural body.* In these films, the problem is not the damaged psyche of the transqueer, rather the way the culture (parents, peers, institutions) damage the person who does not fit within the gender/sex binary.

Images of comic MTF transqueers get a lot of play on American television and film. From the ridiculous cross-dressing represented in *Bugs Bunny*, *Family Guy*, and *Too Wong Foo*, various "talk shows" featuring cross dressing males, and *South Park* to the representation of trans males performing in drag in *The Drew Carey Show*, *Ru Paul*, *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and *Eddie Izzard* we learn to laugh at transqueers as silly and dismiss them as



theater. Representations of transqueers who are not acting as entertainers or who are not interested in surgically modifying who they are need to be presented in the classroom to combat the one-sided education that American film and television is providing. What is also missing from all these representations are transqueers who are content or comfortable with being transgendered. Even when FTM transqueers are presented, we are expected to laugh at them or stare in wonder at their troubled or freakish lives. If we begin to see transqueers as people, if we begin to question who is left out of the gender system and why, we will also be forced to interrogate not only sexuality (and heterosexuality as the norm) but also the patriarchy (where there needs to be a distinct and clear difference between male/masculine and female/feminine to maintain the patriarchal power structure). Inherent in these one-dimensional portrayals of trans identity is the threat to the patriarchal power structure, the fear that, if the question of what is male or what is man is clouded, what will happen. To create a world where transqueers are accepted for who they are instead of who they will become with the help of a surgeon's knife and a doctor's prescription, we must educate against the dominant narrative within our classrooms by queering the curriculum with complicated and real representations of trans identities.

## **NOTE**

1. A note on pronouns: when the person I am referring to has designated a specific pronoun for himself or herself, I use that pronoun. If the person I am referring to has not designated a pronoun, or if I am generally speaking about transpeople, I will use the gender-neutral pronoun of "hir" and "zhe." These terms are embraced by many activists in the trans community as a way of shaping language to reflect their reality. Standard written English does not allow for a gender-neutral third person singular pronoun.

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