

Gateway Into the Mainstream: Transgender Representation in American Visual Media

In 2014, Jared Leto, bearded and besuited, accepted the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor for his role in *Dallas Buyers Club*. He received this award for playing a transgender woman. And yet, in his nearly two-and-a-half minute acceptance speech, he did not, at any point, acknowledge transgender people. He told the story of his mother, thanked the people who he worked with in the movie, offered his support to people in Ukraine and Venezuela, and dedicated his acceptance to the people who have died from AIDS and “those of you out there who have ever felt injustice because of who you are or who you love.” He did not mention that 29% of transgender people live in poverty. He did not mention that 47% of transgender people have experienced sexual assault. He did not mention that 40% of transgender people have attempted suicide - a rate nine times higher than that of the general US population.

“Problematic, Dismissive and Fetishizing:” Casting Cisgender Actors as Transgender Characters

This situation is not unique when it comes to cisgender people playing transgender characters. Rather, it is an example of the broader issues that come with these casting decisions. When transgender characters are played by people of the opposite gender, as Jared Leto did when he played transgender woman Rayon, it pushes the narrative that transgender people are not truly the gender that they identify with. In a similar situation, during the controversy surrounding Scarlett Johansson’s brief acceptance of the role of a transgender man in *Rub & Tug*, transgender actress Indya Moore tweeted in response, “Wen [sic] cis women play trans men you are reducing the existential experience of a trans man as playing dress up [... this is]

problematic, dismissive and fetishizing” (Han). This belief has a strong effect on the rights of transgender individuals. For example, “bathroom bills” are laws intended to prevent transgender people from using bathrooms that align with their gender identity¹. Proponents of these bills often cite the argument that trans women are men masquerading as women. These arguments hold more traction when they are reinforced by media portrayals of transgender people by cisgender people.

Casting cisgender people as transgender characters also has a negative effect on transgender actors and actresses. The small number of transgender roles means that there are limited opportunities for transgender actors. When cisgender people take these roles, they further limit transgender actors from working. Beyond reserving the roles of transgender characters for transgender people, there is another way to increase opportunities for transgender actors: cast them as traditionally cisgender roles. Jamie Clayton, a transgender actress and model, tweeted in response to Scarlett Johansson accepting the lead role in *Rub & Tug*, “Actors who are trans never even get to audition FOR ANYTHING OTHER THAN ROLES OF TRANS CHARACTERS [...] Cast actors WHO ARE TRANS as NON TRANS CHARACTERS” (Han). Why is casting transgender actors as non transgender characters different from casting cisgender actors as transgender characters? When characters are written as transgender, they are usually written so because their transgender identity is relevant to their characterization or the plot. When characters are written as cisgender, they are usually written so because that is considered to be

¹ In 2017, Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, New York, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and Wyoming introduced legislation to restrict use of gender-specific facilities such as bathrooms and locker rooms based on “biological sex” (Kralik).

the default or normal gender identity; being cisgender is not relevant to their characterization or the plot. By casting transgender actors as traditionally cisgender characters, nothing would be lost in terms of storyline, but much would be gained in terms of representation.

Because so few transgender roles exist, the list of well-known transgender actresses is short: Laverne Cox. When it comes to well-known transgender actors, the list is even shorter: it doesn't exist. Since 2010, there has been one non-documentary film featuring a transgender man produced in the US: *3 Generations* ("List of Transgender Characters in Film and Television"). The transgender man was played by a cisgender woman. Although there have been movies and television shows with transgender women as characters, none featuring a transgender actress have reached the same level of success as *Orange is the New Black*, a Netflix series that began in 2013 featuring Laverne Cox as a supporting character. This success has led to Cox being the primary transgender voice in American news media coverage of transgender issues. This focus on Cox sets her up as a spokeswoman for the transgender community as a whole. While Cox has used this position positively to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights, the heavy attention given to her and her work dulls the attention given to other transgender creators and their works.

"She's Not a Lesbian. She's a Boy:" Problematic Representations of Transgender Characters

The issue of transgender representation extends beyond casting decisions and includes how transgender characters are portrayed, regardless of who plays them. Representations of transgender people in media, particularly during their transition, often focus exclusively or excessively on their transgender identity, without developing other parts of their character. For

example, in the 2015 film *3 Generations*, two characteristics define transgender protagonist Ray: his transgender identity and struggle to obtain hormone therapy, and, secondarily, his relationship with his estranged father. Although Ray has interests that in a cisgender character would not be related to his gender identity, they are framed in this film in such a way as to represent his struggle. Ray enjoys filming and video editing. However, this hobby is exclusively used to document his transition. His other main interests, skateboarding and working out, are framed in the context of the film he is making, associating them irrevocably with his transition. Ray's skateboarding symbolizes his journey from a female body to a male body via hormone therapy. This is most clearly shown when a voiceover of Ray counting down the weeks until he starts testosterone cuts to a skatepark. Similarly, Ray works out in order to appear more masculine. His editing shows this, as he often narrates his desire to be a boy over footage of himself working out. Although gaining muscle mass is a way to pass better in mainstream society, and symbolism has cinematic value, by not including aspects of Ray's character unrelated to his transgender identity, the film provides fewer avenues for viewers to relate to and therefore empathize with Ray.

In order to demonstrate that transgender people should be included in mainstream society, characters who have achieved "success" as a transgender individual are often presented in a way that conforms to heterosexual gender ideals (Glover 339). In particular, successful transgender women are often portrayed as female stereotypes in the way they speak, dress, and groom themselves. For example, Laverne Cox's character Sophia Burset in *Orange is the New Black* initially presents as very feminine, with immaculate hair, flawless makeup, and the traditionally feminine occupation within the prison as a hairdresser. However, these traits come

under attack when her gender identity comes under attack, showing that they represent her identity as a woman. By conforming to gender stereotypes, transgender characters mitigate the audience's discomfort with their other deviances from typical gender roles. Additionally, transgender characters often assert that they are straight. For example, in *3 Generations*, Ray's mother explains to his grandmother that "[...] she's not a lesbian, Mom. She's a boy." Despite misgendering Ray, she correctly identifies the separation between his gender and sexual identities. By identifying with heterosexuality, transgender characters again seek to temper potential audience disapproval by identifying with the acceptable dominant sexuality.

In some ways, these strategies can be effective and valuable ways to bring transgender characters to a mainstream audience. Transgender characters who look and act like cisgender characters help audiences accept that transgender people truly are the gender they identify as. However, if non-passing transgender characters are not also portrayed in a positive light, they can be excluded from the realm of acceptability. In addition, by using gender nonconformity to create conflict and gender conformity as a resolution to that conflict, film and television reinforce gender stereotypes by continuing to portray gender conformity as positive and nonconformity as negative (Keegan). Similarly, the argument that, for example, transgender women who are attracted to men are straight has value because it asserts that transgender women truly are women. However, when this appeal to heterosexuality is used to distance transgender characters from less desirable sexualities, it reinforces the idea that heterosexuality is positive and other sexualities are negative. Both of these appeals reinforce cultural standards that impact more than just transgender people; they negatively impact both people who do not live up to gender stereotypes and non-heterosexual people.

“Five Years, Eighty Thousand Dollars, and Her Freedom:” Complex Representations of Transgender Characters

These appeals to heterosexual identity give an apparent model for transgender people to follow in order to achieve acceptance. This is an expensive model to follow. Some movies and television shows address this, such as in *Orange is the New Black* when Sophia Burset reveals that her transition cost her “five years, eighty thousand dollars, and [her] freedom” (Heder). Considering the disproportionate number of transgender people in poverty, this method of achieving acceptability is not feasible for many of the people who desire it. FX’s television show *Pose* also addresses the negative consequences that can come from sex reassignment surgery. *Pose*, which features an ensemble cast largely composed of transgender actresses, details the lives of transgender women and gay men involved in the 1980s New York City ball culture, in which they competed in categories such as dancing, outfits, and appearance. During one competition, announcer Pray Tell sums up the expectations that transgender women face in the world, saying “You have to pass in every way, bitches. Your hair has to pass. Your clothes have to pass. Your makeup has to pass. Your face has to pass. Passing is your gateway into the mainstream” (Canals). This announcement voices over scenes of both the competition and of transgender woman Elektra Abundance preparing for sex reassignment surgery. Although *Pose* recognizes the importance of passing for the success of transgender people in America, and although some characters use not passing to insult other characters, it overall does not portray passing as the solution to transgender people’s problems. In Elektra’s case, although her decision made her happier with her body, it caused her sexual partner and financial supporter to reject her,

leading her to return to the sex work industry. For both of Sofia and Elektra, sex reassignment surgery not only cost them money, but their freedom as well. Many transgender people do not receive sex reassignment surgery, either because the cost is too high or because they simply do not want it. Sex reassignment surgery should therefore not be presented as the only way for transgender people to be accepted.

Rather than relying on appeals to heterosexual identity, transgender characters can be written as fully developed characters with aspects that resonate with the audience in other ways. For example, although the 2005 film *Transamerica* focuses heavily on main character Bree's journey from non-passing (and therefore non-conforming to female stereotypes) to passing transgender woman via sex reassignment surgery, it pairs this struggle with Bree's reconciliation with her estranged son. This non-transgender part of her character appeals to the audience's presumed value of family in order to render Bree sympathetic. In this aspect, the movie appeals to a non-harmful aspect of Bree's character in order to reconcile the audience with her transgender identity. If movies and television portray transgender characters with more fully developed personalities, they will allow the audience to empathize with transgender characters in a broader way, which would hopefully translate to a broader acceptance of transgender people.

The implications of negative portrayals of transgender characters are particularly important both because few transgender characters are written and because, as transgender writer and producer Janet Mock contends, "often, the only time an ally or cisgender person will have an interaction with a trans person in life will be through the television, will be through a magazine article, will be through an Internet clip that goes viral" (Glover 341). The limited number of transgender stories being told in American film and television has a profound impact on how

transgender people are perceived. Although she has made controversial comments about transgender women and feminism, novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's observations on the importance of representation of groups are still applicable to transgender people: when only one narrative is repeatedly told about a group, "that is what they become" ("The Danger of a Single Story"). When cisgender people play transgender characters, it causes viewers to see transgender people as men and women dressing up as or impersonating the opposite gender. When transgender characters are seen as a problem to be solved by assimilating into heterosexual society, it causes viewers to assume that that is the only way for a transgender person to legitimately exist in the world. When transgender characters are defined only by their gender identity, it causes viewers to define all transgender people solely by their gender identity.

The solution to this broader problem is an aggregate of the solutions I have already proposed to the smaller issues with transgender representation in visual media. Cast transgender people as transgender characters. Show successful transgender characters that are not only people who pass by conforming to heterosexual gender and sexuality stereotypes. Replace cisgender as the default gender identity, and write fully-developed transgender characters with interests, struggles, and relationships that go beyond their gender identity. Don't just tell the transgender story; tell the stories of transgender people.

Works Cited

- Canals, Steven. "Mother's Day." *Pose*, season 1, episode 5, FX, 1 July 2018.
- Dellal, Gaby, director. *3 Generations*. The Weinstein Company, 2015.
- Glover, Julian Kevon. "Redefining Realness?: On Janet Mock, Laverne Cox, TS Madison, and the Representation of Transgender Women of Color in Media." *Souls*, vol. 18, no. 2–4, Oct. 2016, pp. 338–57. *Taylor and Francis+NEJM*, doi:[10.1080/10999949.2016.1230824](https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2016.1230824).
- Han, Karen. "Scarlett Johansson Will Play a Transgender Man, Citing Jeffrey Tambor to Defend the Choice." *Vox*, 5 July 2018, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/7/5/17536832/scarlett-johansson-transgender-man-rub-a-nd-tug-rupert-sanders>.
- Heder, Sian. "Lesbian Request Denied." *Orange Is the New Black*, season 1, episode 3, Netflix, 11 July 2013.
- James, S. E., Herman, J. L., Rankin, S., Keisling, M., Mottet, L., & Anafi, M. (2016). *The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey*. Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality.
- "Jared Leto Winning Best Supporting Actor." *YouTube*, Oscars, 11 Mar. 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=VCtch3DzLRs.
- Keegan, Cael M. "Moving Bodies: Sympathetic Migrations in Transgender Narrativity." *Genders*, no. 57, 2013. Contemporary Women's Issues, *Gale*, <http://www.galegroup.com/apps/doc/FA324981029/Fcwi/Fu3Ducsantacruz%26sid%3DCWI%26xid%3D78311a46>.

Kralik, Joellen. “‘Bathroom Bill’ Legislative Tracking.” *National Conference of State Legislatures*, 28 July 2017,

www.ncsl.org/research/education/-bathroom-bill-legislative-tracking635951130.aspx.

“List of Transgender Characters in Film and Television.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_transgender_characters_in_film_and_television.

“The Danger of a Single Story.” Performance by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *YouTube*, TED, 7 Oct. 2009, www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg.

“*Transamerica* (Film).” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transamerica_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transamerica_(film)).