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# Towards a Truer Representation: Transphobic Casting Politics and the Cis-Gaze in Film

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Summer Research 2015

Towards a Truer Representation: Transphobic Casting Politics and the Cis-Gaze in Film

## Abstract

I looked at how trans characters are rarely portrayed as dynamic within film. False representations of trans lives is both a result of transphobia within our society and serves as a force that maintains and perpetuates transphobia. Transphobia manifests in two distinct ways, first as erasure of non-binary identities, and secondly as delegitimizing trans identities through a combination of problematic plot elements, transphobic character development, and casting decisions that are not privileging of trans actors.

I examined multiple films, as well as one television series. The first film being *Boys Don't Cry*, which centered around narratives of violence against trans people. *Boys Don't Cry* also features problematic production elements, as no trans people were included in the entire production of the film, thus disallowing trans people to self-narrate stories of transness.

The second film is *Albert Nobbs*, which is violent in both its depiction of transness and its production. The film relies on portraying a trans man as an "in fact" woman, who is dressing as a man in order to avoid violence. This is egregious in its portrayal in that trans men do not face external violence, when actually the opposite is correct.

Following the conversation on transphobia in film, I looked at how problematic portrayals of transness are damaging to the trans community. With heightened rates of violence directed at trans people, inaccurate portrayals only reinforce damaging stereotypes that directly result in violence. In all of these cases, trans people rarely self-narrate, and typically exist in film for the benefit of cisgender people. Portraying

trans characters in this way does nothing except create an incredibly toxic socioeconomic environment where trans people are forcibly located within close proximity to violence, specifically egregious violence that is exacerbated by a distinct lack of mental and physical health resources for trans people, thus rendering them in distinct social isolation and unable to attain basic health care.

## **Introduction**

Trans characters are rarely portrayed as dynamic within film. This false representation of trans lives can be attributed to both transphobia within our society, as well as serve as force that maintains and perpetuates transphobia. Transphobia manifests in two distinct ways, first as erasure of non-binary identities, and secondly as delegitimizing trans identities through a combination of problematic plot elements, transphobic character development, and casting decisions that are not privileging of trans actors.

This paper seeks to examine two specific films in its examination of trans identities in film, as well as one television series. The first being *Boys Don't Cry* (Pierce, 1999), which centered on narratives of violence against trans people, including external violence inflicted on trans bodies, but also in its hyper visibility on othering trans bodies. *Boys Don't Cry* also features problematic production elements, as no trans people were included in the entire production of the film, thus disallowing trans people to self-narrate stories of transness. However, redeeming qualities in *Boys Don't Cry* include its honest

portrayal of external violence inflicted upon rural trans bodies, its intersectional approach in examining class, geographic positioning, and access to medical care.

The second film is *Albert Nobbs*, which is violent in both its depiction of transness, as well as its production. The film relies on portraying a trans man as an “in fact” woman, who is dressing as a man in order to avoid violence. This is egregious in its portrayal in that trans men do not face external violence, when they in fact do at significantly heightened rates; it’s secondarily violent in its intentional misgendering of a trans man, including its portrayal of trans men as “in fact” women.

Finally, this paper will look at the lack of gender fluidity in both films, and within the film industry as a whole. With hardly any tangible representation of Non-Binary, Genderqueer, Genderfluid, Agender, and other non-binary trans identities, there will be a discussion on why this is problematic and what the lack of discourse means to larger trans narratives. A short discussion on a non-binary character in the television series *Orange is the New Black* will occur as an example of a good portrayal of non-binary identities, and as an excellent production model for trans films, as the non-binary character was played by a non-binary actor.

After discussing the aforementioned films, a conversation on that all of this information means will occur in specific regards to how and why problematic portrayals are damaging to the trans community. With heightened rates of violence directed at trans people, inaccurate portrayals only reinforce damaging stereotypes that directly result in violence. In all of these cases, trans people rarely self-narrate, and typically exist in film for the benefit of cis people. Portraying trans characters in this way does

nothing except create an incredibly toxic social environment where trans people are forcibly located within close proximity to violence, specifically egregious violence that is subtended by a distinct lack of mental and physical health resources for trans people, thus rendering them in distinct social isolation and unable to attain basic health care. Refusing to portray trans people in a positive light, as indicated by character depth, allows for transphobia to continue. Trans people, when shown in films at all, are typically cast as either the catalyst for character development of cis characters, comedic relief, or they are frequently dehumanized to essentially become props to indicate an unsafe surrounding that the cis characters are located.

### ***Boys Don't Cry* and On-Screen Violence Against Trans Bodies**

The 1999 film, *Boys Don't Cry*, is considered by many to be one of the first films to portray a nuanced depiction of trans identities, and indeed it did portray a trans man without relying on utilizing transness as a comedic device. The film is based off of the life of Brandon Teena, a trans man who was sexually assaulted and murdered in an anti-trans hate crime in 1993 (Halberstam, 2001). The film both accurately portrays the violence that Teena experienced, but ultimately remains problematic in its lack of a trans-centric production team, exacerbated by the ultimate decision to cast a cisgender woman, Hilary Swank, as the main protagonist. The controversial decision to cast Swank as a trans man in the film was heightened by her being awarded an Oscar for

Best Actress for her portrayal in the film, with the trans community citing inappropriate casting decisions as the core of the problematic elements of the film (Rigney, 2003).

In terms of the actual plotline in *Boys Don't Cry*, the film is mediocre in regards to positive transgender representation. While its portrayal of anti-transgender violence is necessary, the film's fictionalization of the events removes it from reality enough to make it more palatable for a cisgender audience (Halberstam, 2001). This can be evidenced by the widespread public support of *Boys Don't Cry*, while the actual documentary of Brandon Teena's life, *The Brandon Teena Story*, was markedly less distributed and has less reviews in general (Hird, 2001). The film also heavily relies on portraying trans narratives as inherently victim narratives. The entire film is based on creating an emotional buildup for Teena's eventual murder, which serves to reposition Brandon Teena solely as an object in which cisgender people can inflict violence upon. With the vast majority of trans narratives in film being focused on the violence inflicted on trans bodies, there is little representation that illuminates a positive outcome for transgender people.

The film also has serious implications when it comes to the casting choices of the director and production team. The production team decided to cast Hilary Swank, a cisgender woman, as the leading role. Allowing a cisgender woman to play the role of Brandon Teena serves to position transness as inherently performative, as opposed to a concrete gender identity. It positions transness as a costume that cisgender people can put on and take off at their discretion, and as something that can be mimicked without any meaningful engagement with the trans community. It also begs the question

of the identities of the actors that were turned away in that casting decision, specifically the possibility that an actual transgender man could have successfully played the role of Brandon Teena, which would have allowed for greater visibility for and by the transgender community. By casting a cisgender actor in the role of a transgender character, it became clear that the producers were creating the film for a cisgender audience, and that any meaningful engagement with the transgender community was not specifically desired or attained.

### ***Albert Nobbs* and Transness as Inherently Performative**

*Albert Nobbs* (2011) was directed by Rodrigo Garcia, focuses on an individual who self-identifies as a man, but exists in a time era that predates language and discourse surrounding transgender identities. The basic premise is that a presumably transgender man works at a hotel after being sexually assaulted, his employers are unaware of his gender status and he lives as a man. He eventually meets another man who is in the same situation as he is, and they become friends. Eventually, he dies at the end of the film, never attaining his dream of leading a quiet heterosexual life. The film becomes problematic in two core ways, first in its portrayal of transness as a means to escape gender based violence, and secondly in its casting of two cisgender women to play the roles of presumably transgender men.

Towards the end of the film, there is a scene where the two transgender men don dresses as they run along a local beach in an attempt for the filmmakers to

demonstrate a sense of freedom that is apparently attached to notions of gender essentialism. Despite both men living as men, and identifying as men in their day-to-day interactions, the filmmakers inherently position them as “in-fact” women because of the genitalia the men have (Romano, 2012). Throughout the film, we see the characters become hyper considered with their bodies, even to the point of the characters undressing on screen to prove to the audience that they have breasts, and thus cannot be actual men. While this hyper visibility on their bodies is occurring, the two men form a friendship that ultimately leads them to going out in public dressed as women one day. The intended effect on the audience is to communicate a sense that these men were never ‘real men’ and were always “in fact” women who were simply performing a male gender role (Romano, 2012). By the two of them wearing dresses, they are apparently free and able to rejoice in their ability to be ‘real women’ at that point in time. In doing this, the film positions transness as a false gender status and as something that is inherently performative. *Albert Nobbs* also relies on the assumption that the men are ‘pretending to be men’ because they are both escaping misogynistic violence (Romano, 2012). This assumption that transgender men do not face violence is just plainly false, as rates of violence directed at transgender people are disproportionately higher than rates of violence directed at cisgender people (Testa, 2012).

The second way in which *Albert Nobbs* is inherently problematic is in its choice to cast a cisgender woman into the role of a transgender man. In casting a cisgender actor in the role, it reinforces the idea that the main character is not a real man at all, but rather is essentially a woman (Rooney, 2011). The casting decisions also

directly takes jobs away from trans actors in its preference on casting cisgender actors in the role. In addition to all of this, casting cisgender actors creates a dynamic that positions cisgender people as better storytellers of transgender stories, which serves to inherently silence trans voices.

### **Non-Binary Visibility and *Orange is the New Black***

The Netflix series, *Orange is the New Black*, first aired in July 2013 (Kohan) and has gained a significant following since then. While the story initially focuses on the experiences of Piper Chapman, a cisgender white woman who had a vaguely defined sexuality, it eventually shifts its focus predominantly on the other inmates who come from a plethora of backgrounds. Of these inmates, two in particular are fascinating to look at in the context of transgender representation. The first being Sophia, a black transgender woman, who is played by Laverne Cox, who is also a black transgender woman. The second character being Stella, who is a white non-binary character, who is played by non-binary actor Ruby Rose. Both characters are realistically written without gratuitous violence being inflicted upon their bodies, and both were appropriately cast. The intentionality of the director in making these decisions becomes obvious in the post-production aspects of the work in how the actors have discussed their respective roles in the series.

Casting Laverne Cox as Sophia both informs Sophia's character and allows for Cox to continue engaging transness in a more public setting. Cox's experiences as an

actual trans woman of color inform the experiences of her character, and position Sophia as inherently being a woman, as opposed to a costume. Sophia's gender becomes an irrevocable aspect of her identity that neither Cox nor the audience can separate. Transness becomes positioned as fixed, permanent, and fundamental to both our understanding of Sophia and of Cox herself. Cox is not wearing a costume composed of trans identities, she is narrating stories by and about herself and her surrounding transgender community (Harney, 2013). Cox then becomes an agent of transgender visibility because she is more than just donning a costume in order to gain notoriety, she is telling transgender narratives in a meaningful way and doing it without divorcing transness from either herself or from her character (Harney, 2013). This crucial distinction is evidenced in how she has become an incredibly influential figure within the trans community, frequently bringing transgender issues to the public spotlight.

Similar to how Cox becomes a figure of transness within mainstream media, Ruby Rose has been able to do similar things in regards to non-binary gender identities. Rose plays a character named Stella, and also one of the very first non-binary actors to play a non-binary character (Strassberg, 2015). The audience is introduced to the idea of gender fluidity in the introduction of Stella. While Stella does not directly say that she is non-binary, she hints at the fact that she is neither man nor woman, which gets at the idea of a non-binary or agender space in which she occupies. Rose has also been able to use her character to more openly discuss gender fluidity and non-binary identities in ways that cisgender actors would be unable because of their gender (Strassberg,

2015). Similar to Cox, the audience is forced to accept Stella's gender identity as crucial to and fundamentally a part of her character. Her non-binary identity is positioned as an inherent aspect of her, as opposed to a costume that can be removed and replaced at will.

In both casting decisions, there was clearly some amount of attention given to the gender identities of the actors by the writers and directors (Strassberg, 2015; Harney, 2013). The characters become more iconic because the people representing them are also transgender. It takes the story from a place of purely make believe a repositions it as a radical act is telling narratives that are non-traditional, but extremely important to hear.

### **Transphobia in Casting Politics & Anti-Trans Queer Coding**

In regards to casting decisions in the film industry, there is typically little concern for the identities of the actor, with most roles going to what the executive team deems as the 'most qualified' or 'most talented' actor for any given role (Phillips, 2006; Benschoff, 2004). This is deeply problematic in regards to trans representation in film. Cisgender directors and writers cannot be the judge of what an authentic trans portrayal looks like because of their socialization in cis-supremacy. From early childhood, transness and queerness are coded in films as unattractive, villainous, and to be avoided (Greenhill, 2015). Major childhood villains, such as *Aladdin's* Jafar, *Hercules'* Hades, *The Little Mermaid's* Ursula, *Sleeping Beauty's* Maleficent, and *The Lion King's*

Scar are all queer coded. Queer Coding refers to the idea that a character is imbued with traits commonly affiliated with the queer and/or drag community (Greenhill, 2015; Higa, et. al., 2014). For male villains this usually means he has flamboyant hand gestures, dramatic makeup, little to no interest in women, manners of dress and home decor, a lack of a relationship with their respective birth families, and smooth, yet hostile, speech patterns. We see this type of coding in villains such as Jafar, Hades, and Scar (Greenhill, 2015). In female villains, such as Ursula and Maleficent, we see problematic lesbian tropes used as character markers for them, such as involvement in their use of dark magic, sluggish movement, anger, a marked disinterest in men, aggressive attitudes, cruelty, general unkempt and masculine appearance, and in their larger-than-life stature (Higa, et. al., 2014).

Disney is only one area in where we see queer coded characters, but we can also find them in just about any other film featuring a villain, such as Voldemort in the *Harry Potter* franchise. Queer coding is always reserved for villains, and it usually equates queerness and mental illness with violence. For example, we have Ursula who is queer coded as though she were a lesbian of color or a trans woman. She is physically intimidating, frequently focuses on her breasts as though she's not used to them, and considered ugly by societal conventions of beauty. The story is as follows: Ariel, a young, white, and beautiful heterosexual girl seeks her help to wed a prince and Ursula takes advantage of the young straight girl - but it doesn't matter because heterosexuality wins over the schemes of queer villain in the end.

This narrative of queerness, specifically transness, is so embedded in our society that cisgender directors are likely unaware of their own manifestations of anti-transness. Queer coding is only one way that we see transphobia, we also have overt tropes of 'a man in a dress' as a comedic device, trans women as sex workers to mark neighborhoods as unsafe in cop shows, and trans men as irrationally angry abusers who are "in fact lesbians" that cisgender-heterosexual women need to be protected from (Keller, 2002). All of these forms of transphobia representation render cisgender casting directors unable of making adequate casting decisions, which frequently leads to cisgender actors being cast as transgender characters because the directors felt they were the more qualified actor. Cisgender people cannot adequately represent transgender bodies and experience because they have been deeply socialized in a highly transphobic society.

In being passed up from roles in which trans people can self-represent creates a climate that effectively marginalized trans actors and prevents them from finding work. Rarely are trans actors cast as cisgender characters, yet cisgender people are the norm when it comes to casting transgender characters (Higa, et. al., 2014). This creates a toxic climate in three main ways: first, it assumes that professional trans actors cannot adequately portray their own lived experiences, secondly, it positions trans people as not real in their gender identity by allowing non-trans actors to fill the roles, and lastly it takes away employment from trans actors which only adds to wider problems of homelessness and markedly lower incomes for trans people.

The assumption that trans people cannot accurately portray their own narratives stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of transness (Keller, 2002). Currently, the assumption is that trans people want to pass as the other binary gender, and while they fail to do so it is always the end goal - which is to live stealth. The idea of being 'stealth' is a core concept to understanding transness in film. While many binary trans people are stealth, which means they pass as the 'opposite' binary gender, it cannot be the status quo because the very concept of 'stealth' is rooted in binary understandings of gender that fundamentally erase those trans people who do not want to pass and of non-binary, genderqueer, agender, and genderfluid people (Nestle, 2002).

Conversations of passing/covering and being stealth only exist because of the gratuitous violence that cisgender people wage on trans people. There would be no concept of 'stealth' if transness didn't forcibly relocate trans people in particularly close proximity to violence (Nestle, 2002). Therefore, basing casting decisions on whether or not an actor can either pass as cisgender or attempt to portray some form of a desire to pass as cisgender and live sleath remains an inadequate standard to judge acting merit on. There absolutely needs to be a reenvisioning of acting standards when it comes to transness and the portrayal of trans bodies; particularly that standard needs to be centered on the plethora of trans experiences as dictated by actual trans people. It's inadequate to position realized or idealize stealth identities as the most believable and honorable way to be trans; it's equally as inadequate to position cisgender interpretations of transness as the epitome of transgender experience.

This fundamental problem in casting and in envisioning transness on screen is furthered by casting cisgender actors as transgender characters because it positions transness as a false gender. In *Dallas Buyers Club* (Vallee, 2013), for example, a cisgender actor, Jared Leto, was cast as a trans woman. This creates a false equivalency of interpretation of narrative and experience. Jared Leto cannot fully articulate the experience of being a trans woman because he is, in fact, not a woman. It is fundamentally unempowering to trans women to cast a cisgender man as a trans woman because he benefits from the very systems that oppress actual trans women. This casting decision also positions trans women as ‘in fact’ men who are merely in costume for a role in a movie, instead of realizing the legitimacy of transgender identities. It fundamentally disavows a sense of realness from the character because the audience was aware of the actor's gender identities, which then allows for the viewer's imagination to look for physical cues of masculinity and maleness in Leto's character. Alternatively, casting an actual trans woman in the role would have solidified the character as an ‘in fact’ woman. It's also particularly harmful to assume that cisgender men can realize the realities of trans women because cisgender men are the very people who harm trans women, rarely does any other group wage horrific violence against trans women than cisgender men. Furthering this is that cisgender men are almost never selected to play roles designed for cisgender woman; thus the continued allowance for cisgender men to play roles designed for trans women only furthers the notion that trans women are actually men (Phillips, 2006). These casting standards are inherently inimical to trans success and serve only to alienate the trans community from

entering the film industry, which further relocates trans people in close proximity to violence.

Systemic violence against trans women is only amplified by our society's continued toleration and reliance upon dehumanizing representation of trans embodiment, which stems from allowing non-trans women to represent trans women as if this were adequate or appropriate (Higa, et. al., 2014). Trans people are already at a heightened risk of systemic and interpersonal violence of their marked otherness and resistance to the binary gender identity they are assigned at birth. Housing and employment discrimination are common systemic forces at play that work to marginalize transgender people. Passing up an actual trans actor for a trans role in favor of a cisgender actor is inherently violence because the cisgender actor is significantly more likely to be cast in other films, whereas the transgender actor is not nearly as likely to be successful. If the only roles that transgender people are even marginally likely to get go to cisgender actors, then it begs the question of where in the film community do trans actors belong. Even in successful transgender actors, such as Laverne Cox, are rarely cast as cisgender characters. In fact, Cox gained notoriety because of her role as a transgender character and has yet to be cast as a cisgender character. All of her roles have involved transness to some extent, which only furthers the notion that trans people will only be cast as trans characters, therefore cisgender actors taking up space in transgender roles has a direct correlation on with unemployment for transgender actors.

## **Conclusion**

Within the film industry, there is a long history of casting cisgender actors into roles that would be more appropriately cast with transgender actors. The reasons for this relate to concepts such as queer coding in early childhood films, which create false ideas of transness that make it impossible for cisgender people to accurately represent trans bodies and narratives. With high rates of violence against transgender people, paired with little economic and employment possibility within the film industry because of transphobic casting standards, comes a greater urgency for trans narratives that are delivered by actual trans people. Casting trans actors in stories that are about transness both allows for a more accurate audience reception of what it means to be transgender, and also allows for greater public discourse surrounding transness. Heightened visibility of transgender actors and characters also allows for increased access to these icons by transgender people outside of the film industry who are looking for trans icons. In order for the film industry to better represent marginalized identities such as transgender identities, directors should privilege the casting of transgender actors into roles with transgender characters.

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