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Transgender People in Pop Culture and the Politics of Normalcy

TEXT
Shana Agid

I'm on a bus coasting along the Long Island Expressway. Because it's a weekday morning, the bus is mostly empty. Just past Queens, I find myself watching glimpses of boy-on-boy sex on the miniature screen of a video iPod between the seats one row up. Looking up from the screen, I see the iPod is attached to a 30-something man, taking in his weekly serving of "Queer as Folk," Showtime's fictional extravaganza of white gay drama and discord (and sex).

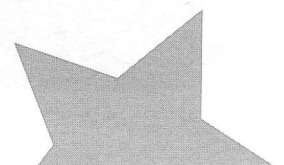
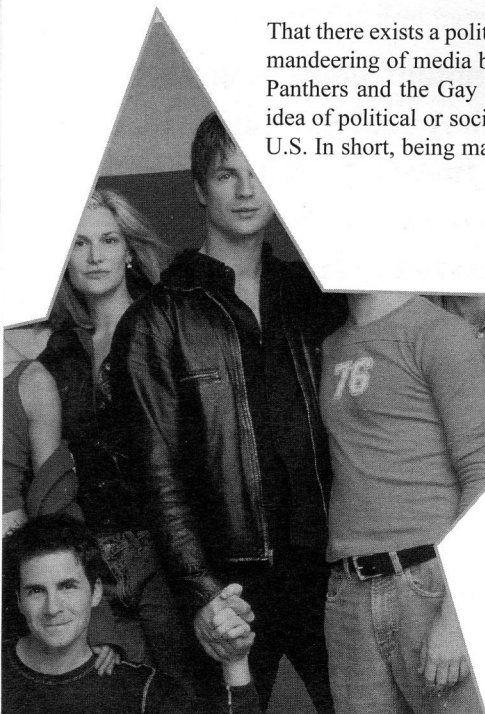
I stop reading and squint at the tiny figures, wondering how queer worlds like these are made, and then made to represent us to ourselves. And how, inevitably, they come to represent us to some larger "viewing public." These are, after all, the award-winning years of the queers – of *Brokeback Mountain*'s Oscar and *Transamerica*'s Golden Globe nods; of the celebrated finale of "Will & Grace" and the premiere of "Transgeneration," the flagship show of Viacom's new LGBT network, Logo; not to mention the ongoing success of "The L-Word" and, of course, "Queer as Folk."

White gay men like those in "Queer as Folk" are undoubtedly the central characters in the (relative) explosion of LGBT images. However the recent – and nearly simultaneous – release of major TV and film projects featuring transgender characters highlights the increasing media presence of trans people and underscores connections between trans "visibility" and the mainstreaming of images of lesbians and gay men. Over the past 10 to 15 years, efforts to image transgender bodies – and I use that term as an umbrella here, if a sometimes limited or faulty one, to include transsexual, trans, gender-queer, and intersex – have helped to shape ideas about what counts as trans, how trans bodies are pictured and quantified, and what social and political meanings are to be taken from those images.

The overwhelming tendency, it seems, for representations in the mainstream is to construct trans bodies as "normal" in an effort to render trans people understandable, tolerable, or deserving. This is done in large part through personal progress narratives, stories of origin and completion – from wrong bodies to right ones, tales of professional and personal success or terrifying, but symbolic, defeat. However, representing any body as "normal" comes with the traps of a visual and political culture in the United States that ultimately recognizes only certain bodies as such – the white, middle and upper class bodies of usually hetero- and gender-normative people. These patterns of seeing and being seen replicate many of the absences and amnesias of larger LGBT political movements, with issues of race, class, and gendered power taken mostly out of the picture in favor of highlighting an oversimplified "just-LGBT" story or political message.

That there exists a politics of representation is certainly not news. We recall the 1980s, identity politics, and the wily commandeering of media by ACT-UP and other activist organizations, and the earlier visual tactics of groups like the Black Panthers and the Gay Liberation Front. What remains worthy of consideration, however, is how representation, as an idea of political or social *progress* or *possibility*, has taken shape in the media-saturated and image-driven contemporary U.S. In short, being made into image is, in theory, tantamount to having "made it." There is a certain romance in seeing

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came normal!

ourselves on screen, or seeing people who, if we squint, we might pretend are close enough. But how does imagining that representation is liberation gloss over the rules by which those representations are chosen? How does it mask problems with the social and political goals such representations are supposed to enable, or the very real structural power that not only keeps anti-queer sentiment alive and well, but organizes people's well-being, resources, and matters of life and death along lines of race, class, gender, and nation? What kind of liberation rests in the body of the acceptable, consumable queer?

In 2005, the release of "Transgeneration" and *Transamerica* marked the next installments in the burgeoning mainstream representation of trans people that arguably started with 1999's *Boys Don't Cry*. These three projects approach the telling of trans stories in very different ways: *Boys Don't Cry* is a fictionalized narrative of the rape and murder of Brandon Teena; "Transgeneration" follows four trans college students in the U.S. for a school year; *Transamerica* tells a fictional tale of a transwoman about to have sex reassignment surgery who first ends up on a life-changing road trip. Despite their different devices, each relies on the principle that difference is best made into sameness, and that trans people become familiar and, yes, normal, when we see them represented in terms broadly understood: right and wrong, illness and treatment, before and after, male and female.

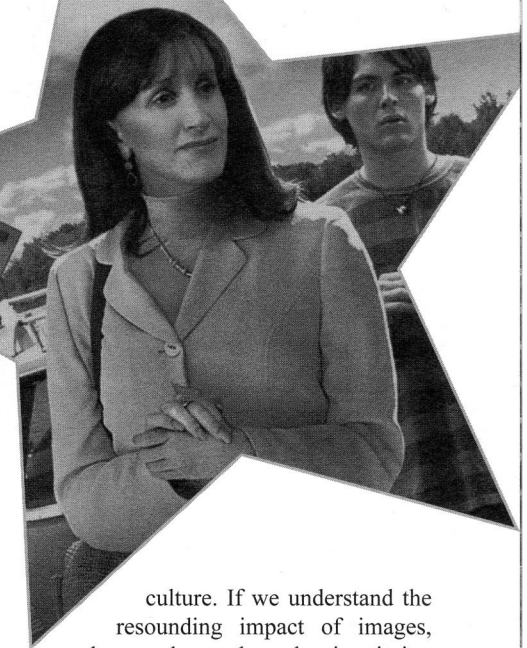
For example, the four students whose trials and tribulations are featured in "Transgeneration" are predictably very different from one another (TV requires variety, no?) but are, according to the show's intro, sharing "one life-changing transition." This explanation at the outset of each episode telling viewers that there is one "transition" is elucidated by the consistent self-representation of each person as having "always been" the sex into which they are transitioning; "transition" becomes a move to the opposite and "correct" side of the gender coin. This leaves touchy subjects like challenging a binary gender system and imagining the

possibility of other "transitions" or a choice *not* to transition, for instance, out of the discussion.

I want to emphasize that there are certainly transgender and transsexual people for whom the transition from assigned sex at birth to another, often opposite, sex is of paramount importance. By identifying the use of a narrative of progress through transition, I am not dismissing or minimizing that experience. Rather, I am interested in the *use* of this story of clear origins and destinations, because it highlights the troubling relationship between representation and erasure, between creating a body of queer and trans images and constructing "ideal" or "real" LGBT bodies.

For instance, in movies and television, and even in some trans self-representations, the establishment of familiar, recognizable indicators of gender are often uncritically centered as "proof" of gender identities. Thus, more or less, tranny boys are *dudes*, transwomen are *ladies*. In addition, the majority of these representations feature white people, often young white transmen and older white transwomen. And though in some instances people of color are "included" in representations of trans bodies and lives – for example, "Transgeneration" offers Raci, a young Filipina transwoman living in East L.A. – the specificities of the experiences of trans people of color are rarely centered, thus re-inscribing whiteness as the unnoted, but ever-present, norm.

Several years ago, life-size posters appeared throughout New York City heralding the arrival of "Queer as Folk" with shining white boys (and two girls) splayed across the bus stops of lower Manhattan. It was, I believe, the first time I'd seen the word "queer" so big and glossy and . . . normalized. That the cast of this breakout all-gay-all-the-time show was also all white and nearly all male did not strike me as a coincidence, but functions now as a warning sign and reminder for the futures of trans and queer visual and political



culture. If we understand the resounding impact of images, then we know that what is missing and what is hidden also has political consequences.

So what, then, *is* missing? There are the disappeared bodies and lives of people of color, poor and working class people, and others who remain non-normative even under more expansive ideas of normal. There is also a resounding silence about the systems that determine the relative power different bodies and people are able to wield. These absences demonstrate clearly what *kinds* of politics are being engaged by and through the majority of mainstream LGBT representations. The limits of the acceptable, consumable queer are arguably made evident by the limits of LGBT politics in pursuit of the mythic American Dream – progress, assimilation, and the ever so mundane and dangerous "normal." ■

Shana Agid is a visual artist, activist, teacher, cultural critic, and 30-something white tranny(boy). His visual and written work seeks to challenge ideas of race, gender, and sexuality in the post-Civil Rights Era United States, and addresses possibilities for undoing relationships of power in the 21st century. Shana can be reached at rindpress@earthlink.net.