

THE GENDER AND MEDIA READER

Edited by

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 Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

xi

Introduction

Mary Celeste Kearney

1

PART I FOUNDATIONS: STUDYING GENDER AND MEDIA

Introduction to Part I

Mary Celeste Kearney

23

1. Feminist Perspectives on the Media

Liesbet van Zoonen

25

2. The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media

Gaye Tuchman

41

3. Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema

Laura Mulvey

59

4. Defining Women: The Case of *Cagney and Lacey*

Julie D'Acti

67

5. Gender and the Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema

Ella Shohat

86

6. Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew

Kimberly Williams Crenshaw

109

7. Irritation and Gender Insubordination

Judith Butler

124

8. Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility

Rosalind Gill

136

First published 2012

by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Simultaneously published in the UK

by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

The gender and media reader / editor Mary Celeste Kearney.
p. cm.

1. Mass media and sex. 2. Sex role in mass media. Mass media and culture.
I. Kearney, Mary Celeste, 1962–

Pq6 S4G544 2011
305.3—dc22
2010044187

ISBN13: 978-0-415-99345-6 (hbk)
ISBN 13: 978-0-415-99346-3 (pbk)

Typeset in Arnhem by Swales & Wilks Ltd, Exeter, Devon
Printed and bound in the United States of America on acid-free paper by Sheridan Books, Inc.

- Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. C. Gledhill. British Film Institute, London.
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Appendix

Table 23.1 Transcription symbols

Speech Division	Symbol
Units	Space
Word	.
Speaker identity/turn start	:
Transitional Continuity	:
Final	.
Continuing	.
Appeal	?
Accent and Lengthening	'
Primary accent	'
Pause	,
Vocal Noises	(Hx)
Exhalation	(Hx)
Quality	<S...S>
Singsong	<Q...Q>
Quotation	<Q...Q>
Marcato	<MRC...MRC>
Other	((...))
Researcher's comment	((...))

24.

BOYS DON'T CRY AND FEMALE MASCULINITY

Reclaiming a Life and Dismantling the Politics of Normative Heterosexuality

Brenda Cooper

I just keep on laughing
Hiding the tears in my eyes
Because boys don't cry.
Boys don't cry.
(Smith, Tothurst, & Dempsey, 1988)

The 1993 murders of three young people in Falls City, Nebraska, (population 5,200) began as just one more crime statistic when Lisa Lambert, Philip DeVine, and Brandon Teena were found shot to death in Lamborn's farmhouse. But national news media picked up the story when Brandon Teena was identified as Teena Brandon, a female-to-male transsexual¹ from Lincoln, Nebraska, who had been "passing" in Falls City and dating a local teenager, Lana Tisdel. As details unfolded, the public learned that two local ex-convicts who had befriended Brandon, John Lotter and Tom Nissen, were so outraged to learn that Brandon was a biological female, they beat him up and repeatedly raped him. When Brandon filed rape charges against them, they hunted him down and shot him to death as he tried to hide under a blanket, then stabbed his body. After allowing Lisa Lambert to place her infant son in his crib, Lotter and Nissen gunned her down and shot the other witness, Philip DeVine (Gabriel, 1996; Messina, 2000).

Lotter and Nissen were convicted of first-degree murder and the story faded from media attention until 1999, when filmmaker Kimberly Peirce brought it back in *Boys Don't Cry* (Sharp, Hart, Kolodner, Vachon & Peirce, 1999), starring Hilary Swank in her Oscar-winning role as Brandon Teena. Peirce's "long-standing

interest in transvestism and transsexuality" (Leigh, 2000, p. 18) drew her to Brandon's compelling story when she read the news accounts of his murder. But Peirce wanted more than simply to make what could easily have been a lurid movie about a murdered transsexual in Nebraska; she wanted to reclaim Brandon's story from the sensationalized media accounts that followed the crime. "The coverage was focused almost exclusively on the spectacle of a girl passing as a boy without any understanding of why a girl would want to pass," Peirce explained. "And I thought that was dangerous" (p. 18).

Given the questions about Brandon's "true" gender, it's not surprising that media reports about Brandon Teena reflected the most heeding kind of tabloid coverage, as journalists sensationalized the story of Brandon's sexuality and how he had deceived the residents of Falls City (Leigh, 2000; Ricks, 1994; Sloop, 2000). Observed *New York Times* film critic Janet Maslin (1999), this "tabloid-ready tale attracted the kind of omnivorous media attention that distorts the truth beyond recognition and milks reality dry" (p. E10). Moreover, John Sloop has argued that the news media accounts not only perpetuated "caricatures of trans-gendered people" (p. 169) but also functioned to reaffirm traditional ideals of gender and heterosexuality and to discipline transgressors like Brandon Teena who challenged hegemonic sexual norms.

There's no question that the varied forms of female masculinity, including transsexuality, have been framed in the mainstream media as a spectacle—degrading transsexuality as an aberration at

best, or as stereotypical caricatures of deviant and perverted behavior at worst (Nangeroni, 1999; Sloop, 2000). Although male masculinity has been the subject of myriad research studies, Judith Halberstam (1998) asserts that scholars have shown "absolutely no interest in masculinity without men" (p. 13), and she warns that the "suppression of female masculinities allows for male masculinity to stand unchallenged as the bearer of gender stability and gender deviance" (p. 41). In light of filmmaker Peirce's goal to reclaim Brandon Teena's story from news accounts that had sensationalized it as aberrant (Leigh, 2000),² I explore the strategies used in the narratives of *Boys Don't Cry* to represent one form of female masculinity and examine the film's potential to "destabilize binary gender systems" (Halberstam, p. 29). My study argues that Peirce's film can function to reclaim Brandon's history from the "spectacle of a girl passing as a boy" (Leigh, p. 18), presenting instead a sympathetic individual and offering film viewers narratives that challenge and confront societal boundaries related to gender and sexuality.³

Media Narratives, Heteronormativity, and Queerness

The most basic assumption of heteronormativity is that gender is naturally ascribed, natural, and immutable. Thus, envisioning a "world of only heterosexuals" (Scheman, 1997, p. 128), heteronormativity insists "on the inbornness of gender identity even when it is discordant with biological sex" (p. 138). Heterosexuality is thus deemed an essential aspect of human nature and intelligibility, and "homosexuality counts as the willful denial of one's true self" (p. 128). Significantly, heteronormativity is a powerful principle of social and cultural order that absents and disciplines all forms of gender transgressiveness into its female-male binary gender system (Shapiro, 1991).

One partner in the power of heteronormativity to order society is the media and their long history of depicting characters who transgress gender boundaries as comic, weak, or as evil (Dow, 2001; Dyer, 1999; Fejes & Petrich, 1993; Gross, 1996; Russo, 1986). These narrative strategies often establish an "additional level of deviance for such characters," by linking "homosexuality with criminality" (Dow, p. 129). As

Dyer explains, the "amount of hatred, fear, ridicule and disgust packed into those images is unmistakable" (p. 297), and says Russo result in "politically indelible and aesthetically revolting" portrayals (p. 32). Even after the media began to respond to demands from the gay rights movement for equality, portrayals were still framed in terms of the problems sexual minorities posed for heterosexual society (Gross, 1996).

As evidence of societal progress, however, some popular media critics have pointed out that more positive images of sexual minorities have appeared over the past decade (e.g., Svetkey, 2000). But scholars such as Dow (2001) argue that even these recent depictions "can serve a masking function as representation is mistaken for social and political change" (p. 136). For instance, Dow critiques the coming-out discourses surrounding Ellen DeGeneres and her television sitcom character, Ellen Morgan. Ellen's coming-out—both on- and off-screen—was framed in popular media as an "escape from repression" (p. 123) for homosexuals, according to Dow. However, she cautions that "the liberation narrative in and around *Ellen* allows mainstream media to proclaim increased visibility for gays and lesbians as increased legitimacy for gays and lesbians, in presumably social and political ways" (p. 136). In much the same way as *The Cosby Show* was used in the 1980s as an example of how racism had been eliminated in American society (p. 137), Dow concludes that the "romantic narrative of autonomy and liberation" underlying *Ellen* ultimately functioned to obscure issues of homophobia and heterosexism, even among heterosexuals who are sympathetic to and supportive of gay rights (p. 135). Robert Brooker and Robert Westerfelhaus (2001) reach similar conclusions in their examination of the depictions of gay male drag queens in the film *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*. Although these researchers conclude that the film's unapologetic gay characters were clearly more positive and a greater challenge to heterosexual norms than is typical in mainstream film's drag queens. The movie's narratives, they argue, functioned to tame and contain "gays and gay experience" (p. 142), while simultaneously reaffirming the "heterosexual order" (p. 153). Both studies demonstrate how mainstream media's depictions of queer experience "can appear to embrace them while at the

same time defining queers in terms that dehumanize, marginalize, and attempt to tame" (Brooker and Westerfelhaus, p. 153). Ultimately, the vast majority of media representations of individuals who transgress gender continue to "reinforce rather than challenge" heteronormativity (Gross, 1996, p. 153): "[T]hey are still odd men and women out in a straight world. . . . confined to stereotypical characterizations" (Gross, 2001, p. 117).

In her overview and synthesis of the contributions to film theory made by gay, lesbian and queer theorists, Julia Ehrhart (1999) explains how previous researchers (e.g., Dyer, 1992; De Lauretis, 1984) articulated the idea that mainstream narratives are inevitably "heterosexualized" (p. 171). Judith Roof (1996) refers to this as "narrative's heteroideology" (p. xxvii)—the ways narrative and sexuality work together to create and perpetuate a heterosexual ideology in culture and media (p. xiv). Similarly, Teresa de Lauretis (1987) has asserted that "most of the available theories of reading, writing, sexuality, ideology, or any other cultural production are built on male narratives of gender . . . bound by the heterosexual contract" (p. 25). The argument that narratives were inevitably "heterosexualized" recognizes the limitations of Laura Mulvey's (1975) concept of the "sexedness" of narrative, as well as the "heterocentric and exceedingly rigid structure" of her articulation of the gaze, which many argue wrote "homosexuality out of existence" (Hanson, 1999, p. 13). One goal of gay, lesbian and queer media researchers, therefore, has been to celebrate and to foreground rather than to minimize the differences of sexual minorities from the norms of heterosexuality (Ehrhart, p. 173). Thus, a queer approach in media studies encourages researchers to identify and to explicate narratives that make heterosexuality rather than sexual transgression appear strange, or narratives that include "qualities of being non-, contra-, or anti-straight" (Ehrhart, p. 174).⁴ A queer approach also provides the necessary conceptual framework for scholars to explicate queer readings within media texts that appeal not only to sexual minorities, but to heterosexual spectators as well. Ultimately, queer theory "seeks not only to analyze but also to resist, dismantle, or circumnavigate hegemonic systems of sexual oppression and normalization" (Hanson, p. 4).

According to Ehrhart (1999), a key component of contemporary queer media research is the "mutability of identity" (p. 175), which views sexuality as performative rather than as adhering to specific, permeable categories of gayness or straightness. Within this conceptual framework, gender is positioned as a social construction and thus the way gender functions in individuals' lives is also viewed as socially constructed (Scheman, 1997, p. 145).⁵ Such an approach works to undermine the "binarily opposed and mutually exclusive" labels of woman and man, of femininity and masculinity (Ehrhart, p. 175), in favor of what Chris Straayer refers to as an "embraced incongruity" of femaleness and maleness (as cited in Ehrhart, p. 175). From this perspective, a woman character dressed in male attire may appropriate male privilege within media narratives because such performances privilege sexuality's instability and contradictoriness; thus, characters exhibiting both female and male traits work to culturally empower such performers by disrupting normative assumptions of two-sexedness (Straayer, as cited in Ehrhart, p. 176).

Straayer's approach suggests that the "queerness" of media narratives resides more in the potential of media texts to destabilize heteronormativity than with any "against-the-grain response" from spectators (as cited in Ehrhart, 1999, p. 176). Alexander Doy (1993) agrees that texts offer a flexible space for queer readings, but sees queerness as having much broader implications: "[C]ultural 'queer space' recognizes the possibility that various and fluctuating queer positions might be occupied whenever *emerge* produces or responds to culture. . . . the queer often operates within the nonqueer, as the nonqueer does within the queer (whether in reception, texts, or producers)" (p. 3). Ultimately, Doy explains that queerness—in any form—should work to complicate the ways gender and sexual categories are understood and how they function in culture and society (p. xvii). Thus, David Halperin (as cited in Scheman, 1997, p. 148) has suggested that the term "queer" is best articulated not as a particular identity, but as a flexible strategy of positioning to resist heteronormative practices.

Similar to the goals of queer media research, one goal of contemporary liberatory activism is to disrupt the perspectives and ideals of society's privileged selfhood that serve to marginalize and oppress

individuals whose lives fall outside the realm of privilege (Scheman, 1997). Scheman says that privileged sexual subjectivity is maintained through the dominant narratives of a culture—the media for instance—which “facilitate the smooth telling of some lives and strathacker, distort, or fracture others” (p. 126). As a strategy regarding media content, research, and social commentary, liberatory resistance seeks to “destabilize the center” of heteronormativity and its privileged subjectivity by challenging its claims to “naturalness” (p. 132). Mass media content and criticism can, therefore, work to problematize heteroideology by expanding and relocating its normative gaze, providing new perspectives of sexual minorities who find themselves marginalized, stigmatized and ultimately excluded from most media content. Hence, Scheman suggests, scholars who “queer the centers” of the discursive practices of heteronormativity (p. 152) serve an activist liberatory function that can challenge and expand our view of what is “normal” and free from the margins those whose lives may not conform.

Thus, media narratives that challenge hegemonic masculinity have the potential to destabilize the heteronormative gaze. Masculinity, Halberstam (1998) argues, is “what we make it” (p. 144). More provocatively is Halberstam’s assertion that a core principal of heteronormativity—that the “penis alone signifies maleness”—corresponds specifically to a tendency among gender scholars to limit their discussions of masculinity solely to men (1994, p. 214). Thus, Halberstam (1998) urges researchers to consider transgenderism and transsexuality as forms of a transgressive masculinity that disrupt the hegemonic norm. As many scholars have observed, film is one site where definitions of sexual difference are vehemently contested (Hanson, 1999). Hence, the story of Brandon Teena in *Boys Don't Cry* offers media critics the opportunity to explore such struggles by considering how film depictions of female masculinity may work to subvert heteromasculinity’s privileged position. Further, *Boys Don't Cry* is perhaps the only film addressing the issue of female masculinity by a self-described queer filmmaker to reach mainstream audiences and to receive critical acclaim and prestigious awards. As such, it has significant potential to challenge the socially constructed and circled meanings of gender. Through an investigation of the narrative strategies employed

to relocate and to dismantle heteronormativity and its presumptions of biological gender identity, I argue that Kimberly Peirce’s film can be read as a liberatory narrative that effectively “queers the center” of heteroideology by centering female masculinity in opposition to what society and its mass media typically depict as “normal.”

My reading of *Boys Don't Cry* in terms of its potential to function as a form of liberatory activism may not reflect the interpretations of average spectators nor of other media scholars and critics. But this is how media criticism should be approached. Media criticism is not intended to be a quest for “truth,” as Dow (1996) points out; nor is the goal to argue that there is only one correct way to read a text. Rather, Dow argues, criticism should be a process of argumentation whereby the goal is to convince readers that their own insights into a text may be enhanced by reading the text similarly. Thus, my critical analysis of *Boys Don't Cry* is meant to present meaning possibilities, not meaning certainties (p. 4).

Framing the “Strangeness” and Paradoxes of Heteronormativity in *Boys Don't Cry*

In this essay, I argue that the narratives of *Boys Don't Cry* challenge heteronormativity and heterosexual narratives in four strategic ways: 1) by dismantling the myth of “America’s heartland”; 2) by problematizing heteromasculinity; 3) by centering female masculinity; and 4) by blurring the boundaries of female masculinity. My articulation of these subversive strategies within the film’s narratives supports my contention that the film can serve a liberatory function whereby the privileged subjectivities of heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity are dismantled, while female masculinity and gender fluidity are privileged and normalized.¹

Dismantling the Myth of the Idyllic Heartland

At the center of heteronormativity is the traditional nuclear family. Perhaps no idealization of the traditional American family and its inherent values is stronger than the mythic notion of family associated with heartland America—Mom, apple pie, baseball, and

Cheerios. The sense of morality and virtue, individuality and freedom, and the strong “family values” of hard-working heartland Americans carry potent connotations of the heterosexual ideal at its best. This romanticism was evident in the news coverage of Brandon Teena’s life and murder which represented Brandon as a deceitful “predator” with a “sister” intention to prey on the wholesome residents of a small, all-American town in the rural heartland (Sloop, 2000, p. 170). Indeed, a billboard at the city limits declares Falls City the “All-American Community: A Great Place to Live, Great People, Churches, Schools” (Muska & Olafsdottir, 1998). Invoking the mythic American heartland in news accounts of Brandon Teena’s sly, masculine performance corrupted the “innocence and normality” of America’s heartland and, especially corrupted and violated the Midwestern women who inhabited it (Sloop, p. 172). Such a news frame, Sloop asserts, reaffirmed and protected “normative heterosexist ways of making sense of gender and of disciplining gender trouble” (p. 171).

The narratives of *Boys Don't Cry* can be read as aggressively challenging this perspective and as presenting a very different and much darker vision of small-town America and its residents. The news media’s idealistic images of rolling farmland and hardworking, law-abiding folks who were victimized by an outsider (Sloop, 2000) are countered in the film by lecherous gun-toting ex-cons, bigoted police officers, seedy trailer parks and run-down farmhouses, a barren land populated by dysfunctional, fragmented families, and desperate people working dead-end jobs, whose primary forms of recreation are alcohol and drugs. In Peirce’s view, Falls City is not a place where good-hearted people are content to live their lives; it’s a place where most are desperate to leave but fear they never will. In offering this dark view of the place where Brandon was murdered, Kimberly Peirce’s film works simultaneously to debunk the myth of the all-American heartland and to dispute the validity of its core value—the wholesome nuclear family unit and the heteronormative assumptions that underlie it.

One strategy to problematize a “primary site of heteronormativity” is to depict the traditional family unit in “counter-normative ways” (Scheman, 1997, p. 148). Clearly, the lives of all of the film’s players

are far removed from the cultural ideals of America’s heartland. John Lotter (Peter Saragaard) and Tom Nissen (Brendan Sexton III) are boozing, violent ex-concives in their early 20s, trying to avoid getting busted and sent back to prison. The women who befriend Brandon are hardly innocent or wholesome. Candace² is a neglectful single mother who parties too much and tends bar at the town’s seedy club, Lana’s mother (Jeanette Arnette) is an unemployed, divorced alcoholic who tries to reaffirm her sexual appeal through pathetic flirtations with John and Tom, and later, with Brandon. In Lana’s (Chloé Sevigny) first appearance on screen, spectators see a prematurely world-weary young woman, drunk and mumbling karaoke in the bar where Candace works. Lana spends her free time abusing drugs and alcohol, and fantasizes about quitting her night shift job at the local spinach packing plant to escape Falls City for a career as a karaoke star. In one scene, Brandon encounters a staggeringly drunken Lana at the all-night Quik Stop, where she complains that she’s “stuck in a town where there’s nothing to do but go bumper skiing and chase bats every night of your evil, fucking life.” When they return to Lana’s home and find her mother passed out on the sofa, Lana tells Brandon, “God, I hate my life.”

The film’s perspective is both bleaker and more realistic than the idealist notions of the American heartland and its people found in popular media depictions. Falls City, like many rural communities, is populated primarily with decent, law-abiding citizens and hardworking people, but is also plagued by bigotry, unemployment, alcohol and drug abuse, dysfunctional families and a high incidence of violence that often takes the form of domestic violence (Folstein, 1998; Jones, 1996; Muska & Olafsdottir, 1998). The film’s depiction of the people who befriend Brandon thus represents an important liberatory and subversive strategy in exposing the hypocrisy and contradictions of normality inherent within both the Norman Rockwell American hometown myth and in hegemonic heterosexuality. Rather than romanticizing heartland America and its people, *Boys Don't Cry* functions to contradict the rosy stereotypes by destabilizing the center of heteroideology and relocating its gaze to the contradictions of hetero-sexuality’s claims of natural and virtuous normality (Scheman, 1997). Hence, the narratives of *Boys Don't Cry* disrupt and

problematic the inherent heteroideology that structures cultural myths surrounding rural America and its All-American communities populated by "Great People." As the next section argues, Peirce's vision also reveals the intolerance of Falls City's residents in ways that work to construct normative masculinity as "strange."

Problematising Heteromascularity

Just as *Boys Don't Cry* relocates the mythic heartland to a "place of normative incoherence" (Scheman, 1997, p. 132), it also raises serious questions regarding the assumptions of naturalness and virtue inherent in traditional definitions of heterosexual manhood and its privileges. Ex-cons John Lotter and Tom Nissen are unemployed and regularly abuse alcohol and drugs. Tom is revealed to be an arsonist who set his family's home on fire and, as he explains to Brandon, both men have a history of using self-mutilation as a means to control their violent tempers. Heteromascularity as exhibited through the characters of John and Tom, therefore, seems not only unnatural, strange and lacking in virtue, but also a serious threat to society.

Enter Brandon Teena Halberstam (1998) explained that a FTM transsexual "ventures into male territory with the potential threat of violence hanging over his head" (p. 25) because he is in physical danger if discovered by a male. And this is precisely what happens to Brandon after Tom and John become suspicious about his sexuality. In fact, two of the most graphic representations of heterosexual masculinity as problematic and, in this case, pathological, occur after the two men violently turn on Brandon, ripping off his clothes in order to "prove" Brandon is a female, and later when they repeatedly assault and rape him. John and Tom are outraged to learn that they have been hanging around with a "dyke." The fact that "his dyke" also has been making time with Lana, toward whom John is obsessively proprietary, further inflames John's anger. After John and Tom ransack Brandon's duffel bag and find a dildo, stuffed socks, and a pamphlet on sexual identity crisis, they violently confront him. As Brandon struggles and pleads with them to let him go, they drag him into the bathroom to strip him so they can learn the "truth." Seeing no evidence of a penis,

Tom yells at John to "Touch it." He won't. Repulsed to realize that his "little buddy" is not a "real man," John yells: "What the fuck are you?" While John holds him, Tom then pulls down Brandon's underwear, spreads his legs and fingers his crotch, and then says disgustingly, "Don't look like no sexual identity crisis to me." As Tom restrains a trembling and humiliated Brandon, John yanks open the bathroom door and yells at Lana, "Look at your little boyfriend!" When Lana refuses, John snipes her face next to Brandon's exposed genitals and forces her to look. Despite the "evidence" that Brandon is not biologically a man, Lana pleads with the two men to, "Leave him alone," which infuriates John further. "Him? Him?" he screams.

John's and Tom's rage toward Brandon and his successful masculine performance are not satisfied with this humiliation. They have been cuckolded and they will make Brandon pay. The men ambush Brandon outside Lana's home and drag him into their car. They drive him to a deserted lot, haul him out of the car and order him to strip. John ignores Brandon's pleas to stop, silencing him in the face instead and shoving him into the back seat. While they cheer each other on, John and Tom take turns raping and beating Brandon, proving to themselves that they are the real men. It is a quintessential moment of heteromascularity privilege. After Brandon reports his rape to the local authorities, however, John and Tom enact their ultimate privilege and revenge upon Brandon for having trespassed into their masculine domain, and having made them look like fools. Despite John's warnings to Brandon to "keep our little secret" or "I'll have to silence you permanently," Brandon files assault and rape complaints against them. Clearly the men are in danger of being sent back to prison. In the brutal murder scene that follows, John and Tom find Brandon at Candace's farmhouse, where he has been hiding since the rape. As John points a gun at Brandon's head, Lana pleads with him, and looks at Brandon asking tearfully, "Teena, why didn't you leave? We can still do it." The implication that Lana is willing to leave Falls City with Brandon is the final blow to John's already threatened sense of privileged masculine ego. He shoots Brandon in the head, and after Brandon's body lies on the floor, Tom violently stabs him and John fires another shot into his body. Tom then turns his gun on Candace, killing her in front of her crying toddler.⁹

Boys Don't Cry and Female Masculinity

The assault and murder scenes function to expose the "rabid pathology" present in John and Tom's conception of masculinity, one which assumes that committing acts of violence is their natural birthright" (Anderson, 2000, p. 56). This perception of the acceptability of violence as a male "privilege," particularly against women, is underlined immediately after Brandon is raped when John reminds him that, "You know you brought this on yourself." Brandon replies, "I know. This whole thing is my fault." "Violence and aggressive behavior have long been part of the codes of masculinity in American culture and, in particular, a part of the image associated with the macho-cowboy masculinity of America's heartland. Furthermore, media rape narratives generally reinforce a hegemonic masculine ideology in which masculinity emerges as the "solution rather than the cause of the victimization of women through rape" (Cuklanz, 1998, p. 444). But in contrast, the narratives of *Boys Don't Cry* suggest to spectators that Brandon is not the one who is "sick."

"[I]s male heterosexuality—culturally assumed to be a firmly entrenched, inalienable identity—that shows the greatest signs of sickness and is in dire need of reconfiguration" (Anderson, p. 55).¹¹ The film's depiction of John and Tom's heteromascularity as pathologically violent and brutally enacted has the effect of making it more difficult to see their response to Brandon's "deception" as some kind of "panic" and thus somewhat "defensible," or to condemn Brandon's masculine performance as "sick," which has typically been the case when individuals refuse to occupy their biologically assigned gender (Anderson).¹²

Indeed, the media have long perpetuated the perspective that individuals who do not conform to their assigned gender are abnormal and their transgressive performance of gender is unnatural (Bennett, 1998; Fegles & Patrick, 1993). But the narrative structure of *Boys Don't Cry* suggests that the problem resides not in Brandon but, rather, within the strict construction of normative masculinity and its inherent misogynist attitudes and sexual bigotry that often lead to confrontations and violence against those who challenge the heterosexual norms. As a US Marshal said regarding the residents of Falls City during the murder trials of Lotter and Nissen: "They don't view homosexuals—don't view people that are different from them—they don't view them as being equal.

They think it's OK . . . Well yeah, I can shoot her—you know, she's a lesbian, she's a cross-dresser, she's a dyke. She's less than human. And they rationalize their actions by that" (Muska & Olafsdóttir, 1998).¹³ Thus, the narratives of *Boys Don't Cry* expose the bigoted mechanisms that perpetuate and maintain dominant heteromascularity, effectively dismantling the ideals of normative masculinity and making heterosexuality—instead of transgressive sexuality—appear strange. The next section discusses how, in contrast, the juxtaposition of a normalizing female masculinity with the "strangeness" of hegemonic masculinity works to center the queer by queering the center of heteronormativity (Scheman, 1997) in the film's narrative structure.

Centering Female Masculinity

The film's Brandon Teena persona stereotypes macho masculinity very well, using the behavior of John and Tom as role models. Brandon's performance of masculinity, however, can be interpreted as operating on two levels in the narratives: "When Brandon tries to establish his male identity with his new buddies, he imitates the kind of overtly aggressive macho machismo that John and Tom represent. But Lana falls for Brandon because of his version of masculinity, which contradicts and challenges traditional assumptions about what it takes to be a man and to please a woman. Brandon's articulation of manhood effectively mocks sexist masculine ideals and appropriates the codes of normative masculinity."

Shapiro (1991) reminds us that "transsexuals must work hard at passing in their new gender status" (p. 256) in order to "live successfully in the gender of choice, to be accepted as a 'natural' member of that gender" (Stone, 1991, p. 296), and this is precisely what Brandon does. He meets his male role models during a bar brawl when Brandon tells a man to stop harassing Candace. Having survived this masculine "rite of passage" (Anderson, 2000, p. 55), a bruised but proud Brandon is befriended by John and Tom, who advise him that "if you're gonna get into fights over girls like Candace, you gotta learn a few moves." Brandon's initiation into John and Tom's articulation of masculinity continues when he accompanies them to Falls City and decides to stay and party with them.

"One more night, Tyson. Come on, buddy," John says. Delighted by John's acceptance and the reference to his bar fight, Brandon soon finds himself in the midst of drunken rowdies, taking turns at "bumper sitting"—a macho contest where the goal is to hold onto a rope and stand on the rear bumper of a pickup truck as it roars around a dirt track. John taunts Brandon into trying it: "Come on, stud. Let's go cowboy. . . . Go ahead. Be a man." Eager for acceptance and to prove his masculinity, Brandon mounts the pickup and flies around the field, falling off three times before he quits. He is flattered when John calls him a "crazy little fucker." When Lana later asks Brandon why he "let John tie you to the back of a truck and drag you around like a dog?" Brandon replies, "I just thought that's what guys do around here."

But Brandon's happiness over being accepted as one of the boys is not as great as his desire to win Lana, for whom he developed an instant infatuation. For this goal, Brandon seems to know that he needs to be his own kind of man, not the kind he sees in John and Tom. Thus, when Brandon is interacting with women, it is with a sly sensitivity and tenderness that helps redefine what it means to be a man. As Brandon pursues a relationship with Lana, he exhibits a new form of masculinity—he's the boyfriend young women dream about. He's sensitive, he buys them gifts (although with stolen credit cards and checks), and he's a tender lover who is more concerned with his partner's sexual gratification than his own. When John asks her what she sees in that "wuss," Lana retorts, "I know he's no big he-man like you but there's something about him."¹⁴ Soon John and Tom "find themselves decisively 'out-bogged' by the handsome, sexually adept newcomer" (Brooks, 2000, p. 44). As Halberstam (1994) said of the FTM transsexual in the film *Veru*, who is "more adept at masculinity than most men could hope to be" (p. 221), Brandon's form of masculinity is far more appealing to Lana, and seems more "normal" than the violent, abusive masculinity exhibited by either John or Tom.

Peirce's film, I argue, does far more than simply celebrate Brandon's ability to "outboy" the local males. The prevailing image in the film's narratives is Brandon's self-actualization as a male. With rare exceptions, masculine pronouns are used to refer to Brandon throughout the movie, and in the few

instances in which "she" is used, those referring to Brandon has a female are typically the men whose manhood has been threatened by his appropriation of masculinity. Every time Brandon looks himself in the mirror and admires the man he sees reflected, we are encouraged to share that image, to see him as a male and to share the "exhilaration he feels as a sexual being" (Anderson, 2000, p. 54). From the film's opening scenes—Brandon dressed in men's Western-style clothes, admiring his new haircut, and meeting his date at a roller rink while the lyrics of "You're Just What I Needed" play (Ocasak, 1987)—the underlying message is that Brandon truly sees himself as a man; therefore, living his life as a man is not an abhorrent or deceptive act. As Shapiro (1991) explains, "[T]ranssexuals commonly believe that it is when they are trying to play the role of their anatomical sex as opposed to their subjectively experienced gender, that they are trying to pass as someone they are not" (p. 256).¹⁵ In *Boys Don't Cry*, the narratives privilege Brandon's self-identity over his biological body—Brandon Trema is a man.¹⁶

There's little history of a previous life as a girl—in *Boys Don't Cry*, Brandon's real life begins as a young man. Yet Peirce does not try to rationalize Brandon's transsexuality out of existence. His cousin Lonny ridicules him for stuffing such a large sock in his pants that it looks like a "deformity," and taunts Brandon to admit that he's just a "dyke." A gang of men, furious that he has been sleeping with one of their sisters, chases Brandon, calling him a "Fucking dyke! Freak! Fucking Faggot!" In another scene, Brandon's frustration is obvious when his menstrual period begins and he is forced to scavenge for tampons (which he shoplifts from a convenience store). Spectators see the measures he must take in order to enact his masculine identity: binding his breasts and using a dildo or stuffed socks to mimic a penis in his jeans. Each of these scenes, however, works to privilege Brandon's self-definition as a man. As Ehart (1999) has explained, the "co-presence of seemingly mutually exclusive body parts and accoutrement . . . undermines normative understandings of two-sexedness and renders powerful the respective performers" (p. 176). As a result, the narratives of *Boys Don't Cry* work to demonstrate that the "way in which transsexuals go about establishing their gender in social interactions

reminds us that the basis on which we are assigned a gender in the first place (that is, anatomical sex) is not what creates the reality of gender in ongoing social life" (Shapiro, 1991, p. 257).

Although Brandon finds himself in the position of having to say, "I can explain" to people, these scenes are also framed to focus attention toward Brandon's confusion and frustration over why any explanation is necessary, why others can't accept him for who he believes he is. In this way, the narratives encourage the recognition of Brandon's own experiences of sexual identity and validate what he believes to be his true nature. The underlying message in all of the scenes in which Brandon must offer some explanation for his masculine identity is that the confusion surrounding his sexual identity does not reside in him, but in others—in the intolerance they feel toward those who violate normative heterosexuality.

As the previous section argues, the narratives of *Boys Don't Cry* privilege an alternative perspective of masculinity—female masculinity—blurring the conventional boundaries of sexual identity and opening a space to experience gender and sexuality as performative rather than as biologically assigned. Brandon's masculine performance confirms the constructive nature of gender and, in turn, disrupts heteronormativity's "anbiquated categories" of sexuality: by challenging the "naturalness of gender . . . penises as well as masculinity become artificial and constructible" (Halberstam, 1994, pp. 214–215).

Blurring the Boundaries of Female Masculinity

The narrative structure of *Boys Don't Cry* further confronts issues of gender fluidity through the depiction of Lana as she ignores her suspicions about Brandon's sexuality and, ultimately, chooses to overlook contradictions between his gender identity and his biologically assigned sex. For example, she sees Brandon's cleavage above his bound breasts when they make love, and Brandon pushes her hand away when she reaches for his penis. Still, she continues to date him and make plans for their future together. In another scene, Lana ignores the implications when Brandon is confined to the women's section of the jail. As he tries to explain that "Brandon's not quite a he," Brandon's

more like a 'she.' " Lana cuts him off: "Shut up. That's your business. I don't care if you're half monkey or half ape." Later when Lana's mother and John and Tom demand proof of Brandon's gender, Lana assures him, "I'm going to tell them what we know is true. . . . I know you're a guy." She tells them, "Mom, I seen him in the full flesh. I seen it. I know he's a man." Lana even refuses to deny Brandon's masculine identity after John and Tom violently force her to look at his genitals. And when Brandon struggles to Lana's home after being raped and beaten, her mother says, "I don't want it in my house." But Lana still calls him "he." "Mom stop it. He's hurt. Call an ambulance Now!"¹⁷

Near the end of the movie, Lana does acknowledge Brandon's birth identity as a female, a narrative strategy that refuses to "allow gender to remain unproblematicized" (Scheman, 1997, p. 127). Lana finds Brandon in a run-down shed, where Candace has allowed him to stay. Any doubt that Lana knows he is not biologically male is gone when she asks, "What were you like? Before all that? Were you like me? Like a girl-girl?" Brandon answers, "Yeah, like a longtime ago. Then I guess I was just like a boy-girl, then I was just a jerk. It's weird, finally everything felt right." Further, it is Lana who initiates their love-making. She takes off Brandon's shirt and sees him naked for the first time. "I don't know if I'm gonna know how to do it," she confesses. After making love, the two make plans to return to Lincoln together. Although Lana later changes her mind about leaving town with Brandon, the implication in this scene is that like the character of Annie in *Linda/Las & Annie*, Lana "embraces the ambiguity and constructiveness" (Halberstam, 1994, p. 224) of Brandon's masculine identity.¹⁸ Rather than conform to what Halberstam (1998) referred to as heterosexuality's "jarring need to identify the feminine partner of the transsexual man with normal sexual aims and desires" (p. 156), the film's narratives make it possible to read Lana's behavior as more ambiguous and, ultimately, as far more liberatory. By refusing to label Brandon as exclusively male or transsexual, *Boys Don't Cry* represents Brandon in terms of what Kate Bornstein refers to as a "gender outlaw" (as cited in Halberstam, 1994, p. 218), a representation that negates the "reductive rhetoric of inversion that suggests that one true identity hides within an other waiting for an opportunity to emerge" (p. 219).

Although it could be argued that by depicting Lana as acknowledging Brandon's birth sex Peirce has betrayed Brandon's self-definition as a male, I would argue that this scene is liberatory precisely because it refuses to conform to heteronormativity's categorization of gender as exclusively male or female. The arbitrariness of Lana's attraction to Brandon as a man on one hand, and her acknowledgment and acceptance of his biological sex on the other hand, subvert heteroideology and its inherent oppression of sexual difference. As Scheman (1997) has suggested, the "more important it is for transsexuals to claim a stable and unproblematic gender" and to maintain an "illusion of the normality of natural gendering . . . the more conceptually dependent they are on their own marginality, as rare exceptions to a fundamentally natural dichotomy" (p. 146). Thus, depicting Lana and Brandon engaging in sexual relations even when she has acknowledged Brandon's biological sex can be read as a liberatory strategy that works to blur the dichotomous distinctions between female and male. Rather than denying Brandon's sense of his sexual identity, the final love-making scene between Brandon and Lana has the effect of directing the gaze away from Brandon's transsexuality, allowing the scene to be read as *affirming* multiple sexual identities, which was one of Peirce's stated goals for the film. "Society kept forcing them [Brandon and Lana] into these categories that I don't think they really needed. And that was so destructive," Peirce said (Allen, 1999, p. 5). By suggesting that Lana can love and defend Brandon as a male, even though she has acknowledged he is biologically a female, the film opens a space for sexuality to escape being an either-or proposition.

Thus, the seemingly conflicting depictions of sexuality in *Boys Don't Cry* work to validate and to celebrate multiple expressions of gender and sexuality. Further, by framing Brandon's gender performance as an example of legitimate female expressions of masculinity, the narratives of *Boys Don't Cry* throw into question the privileged sexual definitions of what constitutes "normal" masculinity and sexuality. In so doing, the film "queers the center" of normative heterosexuality by "centering the queer" in the narratives (Scheman, 1997, p. 124). This celebration of female masculinity in *Boys Don't Cry* and the film's departure from the norms of hegemonic heterosexuality render

the unspeakability of sexual transgression speakable, expanding the heteronormative feminine-masculine dichotomy and encouraging us as spectators to reexamine our own definitions of sexual identity and personal freedom.

"Gender Outlaws" and Implications for Media Analysis

It is perhaps preferable therefore to acknowledge that gender is defined by its transitivity, that sexually manifests as multiple sexualities, and that therefore we are all transsexuals.

There are no transsexuals.
(Halberstam, 1994, p. 226)

Among those who have chastised the film industry for catering to the majority, heterosexual audience is Vito Russo (1986) who has said: "Mainstream cinema is plainly chickenshit when it comes to gay life and lives, and it's time we said so" (p. 34). Indeed, mainstream media have a history of allowing spectators to experience vicariously the possibilities of transgressing gender boundaries, but usually only within the safety of comedic contexts that assure audiences that heterosexuality is never jeopardized (Williams, 1996, p. 273), and where gender is categorized as if "genitals always, inevitably outweigh agency" (Hale, 1998, p. 316). Thus, says Richard Dyer (1999), "What we should be attacking in stereotypes is the attempt of heterosexual society to define us for ourselves, in terms that inevitably fall short of the 'ideal' of heterosexuality" (p. 300). This is precisely what I argue is accomplished in *Boys Don't Cry*. Rather than reassuring spectators that heterosexuality is stable and secure, Kimberly Peirce's representation of Brandon Teena and his female masculinity is read here as a liberatory discourse, exposing the arbitrary artificiality of assuming a natural and immutable gender and drawing attention to the damage inflicted both by and upon a society that requires individuals to deny their varied and multiple experiences of gender.

Peirce's film has far broader liberatory and social implications than just contradicting media's traditionally negative stereotypes of sexual minorities. Unlike narratives such as those surrounding *Elmer's* coming-out that facilitate "blindness toward" both

Boys Don't Cry and Female Masculinity

"heterosexism and homophobia" (Dow, 2001, p. 135), *Boys Don't Cry* defies and denies such blindness, graphically depicting the consequences of heteronormativity's bigotry toward gender transgression and condemning the lack of social or political change that could help eradicate such prejudice. Filmmaker Peirce has explained that she needed to make audiences understand Brandon's "journey" and the violence that was exacted upon him, because that's how you fight hate crimes" (O'Sullivan, 1999, p. N49). For Peirce, the most gratifying aspect of the acclaim her film received has been to bring Brandon "into the mainstream, and the audience is falling in love with Brandon, which was the main point" ("Kimberly Peirce," 2000, p. 2).

Larry Gross (1996) reminds us that, more than just entertainment, the mass media are perhaps the most dominant and pervasive storytellers in American society (p. 159). We learn how to think about the world—including about sexual minorities—from mass media. As Nangeroni (1999) observes, the "stigma against transgender people is maintained by the media's denigration and disrespect. Crossdressers and transsexuals have long been the butt of jokes, regularly depicted as something other than 'normal,' not worthy of respect or even protection under the law" (p. 17). For these reasons, films like *Boys Don't Cry* that privilege tolerance and acceptance of gender fluidity have the potential to help reduce the kind of societal bigotry and intolerance that result in hate crimes like Brandon Teena's murder. The harsh consequences of such bigotry is underlined by the film's concluding soundtrack, when we're reminded that Brandon's dream of masculine self-actualization, like his life, "ended way too soon" (Stephenson, Robbins, & Dubois, 1998). As Gross suggests, honest media portrayals of sexual minorities "have the potential to reach the hearts and minds of many Americans. This is reason enough to continue the struggle to transform the media" (p. 159). Close critiques of media performance and content is a vital part of that struggle. While there are multiple ways to interpret *Boys Don't Cry* and other media representations of sexuality, critical readings such as this one, which privilege gender fluidity and liberation from heteronormative straightjackets, also have the potential to contribute to broadening our understandings of gender and sexuality, in both mass media and in society.

Notes

1. For the purposes of my study, I'll refer to Brandon Teena as a transsexual, following the clarifications provided by Sandy Stone (1991), Nancy Nangeroni (1999) and Judith Halberstam (1998). Transsexuals are individuals who identify "his or her gender identity with that of the opposite gender" (Stone, p. 281). Thus Halberstam cautioned that misusing pronouns—using the pronoun "he" to refer to a MTF transsexual or "she" to refer to a FTM—is an insidious practice that, either attempts to rationalize transsexuals "out of existence" (p. 150), or as Nangeroni explained, "disregards and disrespects our most fundamental sense of ourselves. It's about our choice to *define ourselves* differently than our birth doctors, families, and society would define us" (p. 17). It is for these reasons that many transgender activists insist that using "Brandon Teena" and "masculine pronouns as markers of transsexual or transgender configurations of this young person's identity are the only correct modes of representation" (Hale, 1998, p. 313). Hence, I use "Brandon" rather than "Teena" and masculine pronouns throughout this essay, unless citing a direct quotation from another source that uses "Teena" or "she."
2. Most critics agreed that Peirce followed the events of Brandon's life and death closely, and that her objectivity in the film's narratives resulted in well-founded depictions of all the film's characters, including Brandon's murderers (e.g., Bloom, 1999; Stricker, 1999; Wu, 1999). My study, however, is concerned less with the artistic license of Peirce's film than with how the narratives in *Boys Don't Cry* construct a particular view of both Brandon Teena and issues of gender and sexual fluidity.
3. The purpose of my study is to articulate the potential of the film's narratives to destabilize the privileged position of heteronormativity, particularly as relates to female masculinity. This parallels some of Peirce's own stated goals for *Boys Don't Cry*. Therefore, although I make references to instances in which my reading intersects with Peirce's agency, my critique is not an examination of Peirce's intended meaning for the film.
4. See for example: Doty (1993); Burston & Richardson (1995); Evans & Garmann (1995); Hanson (1999); Mayne (2000); Nairi (1995); and Robertson (1996).
5. For additional discussions of gender as performance, see for example: Butler (1987; 1990; 1993); Condit (1997); Doane (1982); and Moi (1985).
6. Peirce explained to an interviewer that, "I identify as a queer" rather than as straight, lesbian, or gay. I like the term "queer" because it gives me the freedom to express more aspects of my personality—the boy side and the girl side" (Miller, 2000, p. 39).

7. Before beginning the discussion, it is important to clarify that I come to this study from the privileged position of a heterosexual. I have attempted to be aware of and sensitive to the rules for writing about transsexuals suggested by Jacob Hale (1997). Two rules are particularly relevant to my investigation of *Boys Don't Cry*: First, Hale advises that non-transsexual individuals must interrogate the motives for their interests in researching issues of transsexuality and sexual difference. This is simple for me: my interests in gender transgression and challenges to heteronormativity are deeply-rooted in the close relationship I shared with my gay brother, and my interests have increased in the years since he lost his battle with AIDS. Hale's next rule, however, is more challenging. Hale suggests that the most appropriate way for nontranssexual individuals to examine transsexual issues is to focus on what dominant cultural narratives tell us about heterosexuality and its consequences for everyone, rather than attempt to write and make conclusions about transsexual subjectivity. Thus, as Hale and Schreier (1997) suggest, I've attempted to complicate my privileged location as well as make a contribution to scholarship by examining how female masculinity may transcend the "frame of anomaly" of heterosexuality (Henderson, 2001, p. 22) in mediated popular culture.
8. For legal reasons, Lisa Lambert, one of Lotter and Nisser's murder victims, is portrayed as Candace (Alicia Goarson) in the movie (O'Sullivan, 1999).
9. For narrative coherence and simplicity, Peirce omitted the third murder victim, Phillip DeVine, from her script (O'Sullivan, 1999).
10. That many men in this country consider committing acts of violence against women a part of their natural birthright is difficult to dispute. "Male-perpetrated violence is a major cause of fear, distress, injury, and even death for women in this country" (Koss, Goodman, Browne, Fitzgerald, Keita, & Russa, 1994, p. ix). Further, the number one cause of injury to women ages 15-54 in the United States is domestic violence ("Violence against" 2001); and the United States has one of the highest rates of reported rape among industrialized nations worldwide (Salholz, 1990).
11. Peirce told interviewees that one reason Brandon's rape and murder deeply resonated with her was because the "violence [he experienced] with men was a violence I knew" (Che, 2000, p. 50).
12. In her review of *The Brandon Teena Story*, Melissa Anderson (2000) says the documentary also relates the rage exhibited by John and Tom to their sense of powerlessness to living lives in which "hope has been extinguished" (p. 55). The narratives of *Boys Don't Cry* would argue also suggest that the men's powerlessness had the effect of emasculating John's and Tom's sense
- of their privileged masculinity: they had been trying to last back at society, friends, and family long before Brandon arrived in Falls City. Consequently, Brandon and his successful performance of transgressive masculinity worked to exorcise their already threatened heteronormativity, and gave them a target on which to vent their long-entrenched rage and to reassert their damaged masculinity.
13. Such bigoted attitudes are not limited to the residents of heartland towns such as Falls City. For example, between the year when Matthew Shepard was murdered and the trial of Aaron McKinney, one of the men convicted for his murder, 35 people who had transgressed their biologically assigned gender are known to have been killed in America (Montgomery, 2000). Among openly gay and lesbian individuals, over half report they have been victims of homophobic violence (Singer & Deschamps, as cited in Dow, 2001, p. 136). Jeffrey Montgomery, executive director of The Triangle Foundation, graphically summarized the problems facing individuals who do not conform to normative heterosexuality in America: "[G]ay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people are at risk every day of their lives. Not only are we the group most at risk of violence, we are most at risk of job discrimination, losing our families, homophobia retains its title as the last socially acceptable form of bigotry" (p. 443). Further, as Montgomery reports, post-verbatim interviews with jury members in trials for some of these crimes indicate that many jurors believed that if the murdered person had "made a homosexual advance," then that person "deserved to die" and the killer should "be let off easy" (p. 443).
14. In explaining her attraction to Brandon, Lana Tisdell told documentary filmmaker Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir (1998) that "It was really nice being treated like a lady instead of just like nothing like dirt."
15. The term "passing" is associated with the idea of people trying to be accepted as someone they are not, and the connotations are generally negative. For instance, passing was frequently used as a negative reference to light-skinned African Americans who tried to live as white, a practice America's racist society viewed as deceitful and immoral. In contrast, sexual minorities often are expected to pass as heterosexuals in order to conform to the "don't ask, don't tell" mentality underlying society's heterosexism. Thus, many sexual minorities continue to pass as heterosexuals in the workplace, the military, and with their families to avoid discrimination and bigotry. In Brandon's case, Sloop (2000) reports that the news media framed Brandon's passing as a man as a dishonest and vile affront against the citizens of Falls City, Nebraska. Yet, as Shapiro (1991) points out,

passing is an essential part of performing gender for transsexuals: the most critical aspect of a transsexual's success is to be accepted as a "natural" member of their chosen gender (p. 296). And as Halberstam (1996) reminds us, transsexuals' lives are often in physical danger when their biological sex is discovered. Given such danger and prejudice as well as Brandon's need to enact his gender identity, Brandon's decision to pass seems a valid and honest response, not only for him, but also for others who must live their lives in a society that rejects and threatens them.

16. JoAnn Brandon was angered when Hilary Swank referred to her daughter as a man, thanking Brandon Teena rather than "Teena Brandon" when she accepted her Best Actress Oscar award ("Swank speech," 2000). Ms. Brandon insisted that the only reason her daughter passed as a man was to keep men from touching her because she had been sexually molested years earlier. Considering the homophobic attitudes prevalent in Falls City (Jones, as cited in Barr, 2000, p. 48; Muska & Olafsdottir, 1998), it is perhaps understandable that Ms. Brandon wanted to defend her daughter as a "normal" heterosexual. Filmmaker Peirce has explained, however, that she never intended to "tell the audience what is and isn't true" (Leigh, 2000, p. 20), nor is that my intention in this essay. The goal of my research was not to determine the "facts" of Brandon's sexuality, but to examine critically the film strategies used to depict issues of gender fluidity and female masculinity in ways that can be read as working to subvert heteronormativity. Thus, I don't address Ms. Brandon's charges in my critique.
17. Lana explained her continued denials despite her growing suspicions in *The Brandon Teena Story* (Muska & Olafsdottir, 1998), and the film's dialogue adheres closely to her explanations.
18. Although Aphrodite Jones (as cited in Barr, 2000) states that Lana stopped dating Brandon after she learned his biological sex, Lana seemed to contradict such claims when she was interviewed and filmed for *The Brandon Teena Story* (Muska & Olafsdottir, 1998). For instance, Muska and Olafsdottir assert that Brandon's sexuality did not become a problem for Lana or his other girlfriends until it became public knowledge, when homophobia became an issue because Brandon's girlfriends were labeled as lesbians (Yehoff, 1999). Since Falls City has a reputation as a "very conservative, racist, and homophobic place" Jones, as cited in Barr, p. 49), it is perhaps not surprising that Lana Tisdell filed a defamation of character lawsuit against Peirce claiming that the depiction of her relationship with Brandon in *Boys Don't Cry* has made her the object of "contempt and ridicule" in Falls City and as a result, she had been

"scorned and/or abandoned by her friends and family" (Barr, p. 48).

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Boys Don't Cry and Female Masculinity

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