

Branding Teena: (Mis)Representations in the Media

Annabelle Willox
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Abstract On the night of 31 December 1993, three people were murdered in Nebraska. One of the victims became the subject of an award winning film directed by Kimberly Pierce in 1999. The representation of the main character is based upon interviews with those who knew the person in question, but for obvious reasons this representation can never be validated. In view of this difficulty, critics attempt to describe the complexity of the main character, yet most fail. In this article I will interrogate media representations of Brandon Teena, showing the implicit assumptions inherent in the rhetoric of such articles. Furthermore, I will show how the reportage of Brandon's murder and the film, *Boys Don't Cry*, combine to reinforce the assumption of a male/female gender binary, even though the film director claims to trouble these assumptions. It is my contention that the media undermines any notion of transgender subjectivity through the rhetoric, reportage and representation of the issues made manifest by and through Brandon's body. I will show that Brandon's body is branded by such rhetoric and representation, and is assumed to be a site of 'truth' that closes the question that transgender poses for subjectivity, gender and sexuality.

Keywords film, media, queer, rhetoric, transgender

Annabelle Willox
University of Wales, Cardiff, UK

Branding Teena: (Mis)Representations in the Media

On the night of 31 December 1993, three people were murdered in Nebraska. One of the victims became the subject of an award winning film directed by Kimberly Pierce and distributed by 20th Century Fox in 1999. Journalists and film critics describe the film itself in similar ways by valorizing the main characters, the characterizations by actors and director alike, the intensity of the story and the effects that such a story/film has had on the viewers. Few of the critics, however, point out that, while based on a true story, the film is not entirely 'true' (for example, in the celluloid

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representation of the murders, only two people are killed). Furthermore, the representation of the main character is based upon interviews with those who knew the person in question, but for obvious reasons this representation can never be validated. In view of this difficulty, attempts by critics to describe the complexity of the main character almost inevitably fail. Descriptions of the life of the main character are simplified and described in uncomplicated, unquestioned terms, thereby questioning the effectiveness of a film that *attempts* to show the complexity of the main character.

The film, *Boys Don't Cry*, is described as an 'indie drama [that] tells the true story of Teena Brandon, a young woman who inverted her name to Brandon Teena and passed as a man in Falls City, Nebraska. After seducing several women, her secret was discovered and she was brutally murdered by two local men in 1993' (King, 1999: 7). With a synopsis like this available to viewers before they see the film it is almost impossible to see how the film could be read as anything other than a story of deception, lesbianism and murder. This would seem to simply recreate the traditional Hollywood 'invert' story where homosexuality is punishable by death, or possibly worse.¹ The question is, however, whether such a reading of the film, and ultimately of someone's life, is an accurate or desirable one.

In this article I will interrogate media representations of Brandon,² showing the implicit assumptions inherent in the rhetoric of such articles.³ Furthermore, I will show how the reportage of Brandon's murder and the film, *Boys Don't Cry*, combine to reinforce the assumption of a male/female gender binary, even though the film's director claims to trouble these assumptions. In order to contextualize this rhetorical analysis, I will first provide a brief history of the rise of transsexual and transgendered political voices, focusing on how certain academic rhetoric has functioned to deny the voice of transsexual people. I will then draw parallels between a specific example of academic rhetorical denial, and the similar devices utilized – consciously or not – by journalistic reports of the film *Boys Don't Cry*. It is my contention that the media reportage undermines any notion of transgender subjectivity through rhetoric, language and representation of the issues made manifest by and through Brandon's body. I will show that Brandon's body is branded by such rhetoric and representation, and is assumed to be a site of 'truth' that closes the question that transgender poses for subjectivity, gender and sexuality. The focus of this article, therefore, is on the linguistic and rhetorical devices in play within western culture – both academic and journalistic – and how these devices foreclose multiple gendered possibilities within political and cultural parlance.

In order to address this question, however, it is necessary to contextualize not only the film, but the issues surrounding the life and death of

Brandon Teena, which includes the thorny issue of 'queer'. Without wishing to conflate the issues of transgender, transsexuality and queer, it is none the less easy to see how, from a western perspective, these arenas of theorization and practice have complicated intersections and intricate relationships. Transgender and transsexual subjectivity seem to be inextricably bound within the knot created by the multiple axes of difference that converge and are contained by queer discourse. To attempt to explain the disparate yet concomitant relations between these arenas it is worth providing a brief, albeit simplified, summary of the genesis of 'queer'.

Queer as a discursive space, and a specifically political strategy, was born initially out of a bastardization of the issues raised by the gay liberation movement, the lesbian sex wars and the advent of the AIDS epidemic of the early 1980s. Disenfranchisement with the aims, objectives and beliefs of the gay and feminist political movements resulted in the creation of splinter groups that eventually rallied behind the shared threat that AIDS posed. One of the issues that gave rise to the mobilization of such diverse groups was dissatisfaction with identity politics, especially in the light of the realization that AIDS did not target social groups; rather its spread was dependent on the acts that one engaged in. Mirroring this realization that identities did not categorize risk, queer activism challenged the notion that identities worked as methods of classification of people. Queer theory in the academy took up this challenge to identity, as Judith Butler explains, 'identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression' (Butler, 1993: 308).

In other words, to concur with identity categories, without questioning the function of such identities, one complies with the normalization of the identities themselves. Therefore, the challenge for queer theory in the academy, mirroring the queer activism of the streets, was to expose the regulatory regimes that relied on given identities, and to question the very foundations of these regimes. This exposure of the function of regulatory regimes results in the questioning, or queering, of the identities on which such regimes rely. Obviously this is a condensed and somewhat simplistic reading of Butler and the origins of such a complicated and multifaceted discourse, but none the less one can argue for an historical correlation between the theorization of gender and the emergence of visibly political transgender embodiment.⁴

Within the academy, then, this queering of identity spread throughout lesbian, gay, feminist and postmodern theory, with transgender appearing to be the epitome of such a queering of gender identity. 'The very act of transgender identity specification performs a kind of work which queer, in deconstructing the specific identity categories of "lesbian", "gay", "man",

and “woman”, has sought to trouble’ (Prosser, 1997: 320). Transgender became the exemplar of queer theory, troubling not only gender but also making an impact on the corollary issues of sexuality, patriarchy, performativity and power. The importance of transgender for performativity, specifically the subversion of gender through transgender visibility, cannot be understated. However, the problem of this new queer regime was that transsexuals, who had been castigated by feminists such as Janice Raymond (1994[1979]), now became a theoretical problem for the new queer gender theorists. While transgender did the sterling work of deconstructing notions of gender and issues of the body, transsexuality seemed to reconstitute the gender binary and bring the body sharply back into focus.⁵ As Jay Prosser explains, ‘queer theory’s approbation has been directed toward the subject who crosses the lines of gender, not those of sex. Epitomizing the bodiliness of gender transition . . . the transsexual reveals queer theory’s own limits’ (Prosser, 1998: 6).

The transsexual has become the visible limit of queer theory in the academy where playing with surfaces and the performative aspects of gender have become the new norm. ‘Queer theory’s deconstruction of sex – its representation of sex as “gender all along” – clearly does not hold for those transsexuals who experience a traumatizing split between their sex and gender, whose goal in seeking reassignment is to align their sex to their gender identity’ (Prosser, 1997: 319). Within this context, the issue of passing becomes of paramount importance. In a manner similar to that of gay liberation where people were encouraged to ‘come out’ as gay, to become visible and to challenge the assumptions of a heterosexual society, so theorists such as Sandy Stone call for transsexual people to come out as trans people. Rather than passing and ‘disappearing’ as historically taught to, trans people are now talking for themselves about their subject position as trans men and trans women. The reasoning for this lies not only in an attempt to counter society’s attitude, but also to challenge assumptions of feminists such as Raymond (1994[1979]) and, more significantly, to challenge the new queer orthodoxy.

This new queer orthodoxy is based around the work of theorists such as Judith Butler, where transsexuality might be seen as ‘not queer’ because it seems to promote the dominant ideology of sex and gender by focusing on the need to align psychical and physical body images, thereby reintroducing the importance of the body as the site of authenticity. Some of the more dominant queer academic theorization focuses instead on appearance, surface, visible transgression and performativity. This leads to a dangerous position where queer can be academically and politically opposed to transsexual discourse, leading to divisive and dangerous splits that deny the intricate links between transsexual and transgender subject positions.

Perhaps then the split between queer and transsexual identities/methodologies might be rendered as a difference between *transgender* and *transsexual*, where transsexuals realize their gender through reconfiguring their sex, and transgenderists de-realize it by living in a gender different from their sex . . . Yet such a neat division belies the complex crossings that take place *between* transsexuals and transgenderists. (Prosser, 1997: 319 emphasis in original)

The sort of post-transsexuality championed by Stone, however, challenges these assumptions by arguing that the subject positions of trans men and trans women are importantly different to those of biological women and biological men. As such, the lived experiences of trans people deserve as much academic, political and personal interest and development as any other gendered subject position.

To clarify this position, Stone begins by explaining her reading of Janice Raymond's book, *The Transsexual Empire* (1994[1979]), as claiming that 'transsexuals are constructs of an evil phallogratic empire and were designed to invade women's spaces and appropriate women's power' (Stone, 1991: 283). It is important to note that Raymond's position on this matter is still pervasive in some feminist academic theorization.⁶ Stone provides examples from Raymond's book that exemplify Raymond's mistrust of MTF trans people, focusing on Raymond's attack on Stone herself.

Raymond explains Stone's position within Olivia Records, an all woman recording company, as divisive, claiming that Stone's position 'only serves to enhance his [sic] previously dominant role and to divide women, as men frequently do, when they make their presence necessary and vital to women' (Raymond quoted in Stone, 1991: 284). One can assume that, from her refusal to acknowledge Stone's gender assignment as female, Raymond feels that biology is destiny in that one can only be born female, or male, and any subsequent changes are impossible to accept.⁷ Such a determinist attitude seems illogical in the face of such obvious gender diversity and, furthermore, would seem to play into the hands of patriarchy itself by denying the possibility of change, thereby reinforcing the gender binary itself. As Mary McIntosh notes, 'the binary thinking involved in the terms of sex and gender has plagued feminist theory; feminism rejects gender divisions, yet much of its theory is concerned with drawing attention to gender and its inequalities and oppositions' (McIntosh, 1993: 31). Obviously this is not the last word in feminism and gender, but it does point out that Raymond seems to hold on to a regressive notion of gender binaries that recent feminist theorists have attempted to deconstruct.

Raymond's refusal to acknowledge Stone's gender status is exemplified in the foregoing extract through her use of male pronouns throughout the text. As this article will show presently, this linguistic denial of transsexual

subjectivity through language is comparable to the media reportage of the rape and murder of Brandon Teena, as well as the film *Boys Don't Cry*. Such silence over the embodied subject positions of transgender people in the media and the academy gave rise to a plethora of new trans voices claiming subject positions previously silent due to ignorance and the inability to name these positions. This new counter discourse came in the form of activist groups such as The Transsexual Menace⁸ as well as academics such as Stone.

These historical, contextual and theoretical issues noted, however, we should examine the media representation of Brandon Teena in order to see the enforcement of dominant gender ideology at work within the rhetorical devices of cultural texts. One article that details the 'facts' of the murder shows not only how classification of Brandon takes place with no regard to his apparent self-definition, but also how the classificatory regime of gender is underpinned rhetorically, even though the reportage castigates the murderers for their intolerance of difference. Written in February 1996, Julie Wheelwright's article in *The Guardian* was one of the first mainstream reports of the murder and subsequent judicial process, to appear in the UK. Within this article Brandon is described as 'a young cross-dresser' who was forced to 'expose her true sex' before being raped and murdered (Wheelwright, 1996: 6). Throughout the article it is apparent that, for Wheelwright, Brandon's body is the site of his gender or sexual identity; 'by *her* teens *she* was rebelling against the high school dress code, refusing dates and make-up' (Wheelwright, 1996: 6, my emphasis). Wheelwright's use of female pronouns when referring to Brandon's past implies that, as far as Wheelwright is concerned, the body cannot lie; the body alone defines Brandon's identity.

Even when Wheelwright refers to Brandon later with male pronouns she does so within scare-quotes, thereby underlining the apparently false nature of Brandon's male gender identity; 'Brandon looked just like a regular guy with "*his*" thin face . . . Since *her* death, *her* family have refused permission to reprint *her* picture' (Wheelwright, 1996: 6, my emphasis). This undoubtedly undermines Brandon's male gender identity, implying that this was merely a performance, a deception, and leading us to agree with Wheelwright's description of Brandon as a cross-dresser. It is the intolerance of this male gender identity that Wheelwright condemns, claiming that Brandon 'has already become an emblem of society's intolerance of the blurring of sexual boundaries' (Wheelwright, 1996: 6). Yet she fails to see, within her own writing, that there is a deeper intolerance at work that even language cannot control. Brandon is a more complicated challenge to heteronormativity and the gender matrix than even Wheelwright can comprehend; namely a person whose gender does not appear to conform to his body, and might never have done.

It is this issue of Brandon's apparently contradictory gender identity and body that leads to arguments over the classification of Brandon as a cross-dresser, lesbian, trans man or transsexual, and provides the impetus for this article. The mainstream readings of Brandon's life include: a cross-dresser who is 'found out', as Wheelwright suggests; a butch lesbian who could not come to terms with her sexuality; a transsexual man who had not yet undergone surgery or hormone therapy. The issue at stake in these readings seems to be the validity of Brandon's male gender identity in the light of his biology that, under the traditional binary understandings of gender, sex and the body, seemed to contradict his gender identity.

When reporting the murder, American lesbian and gay magazine, *The Advocate*, seemed to place their reading of Brandon between the last two possibilities. The article quotes Terry Maroney, a spokesperson for the New York Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, stating that the media and authorities are 'not focusing on the bias aspect – the *fact* that Brandon was transsexual and possibly lesbian. It's because *she* lied. They didn't like it, so they killed *her*' (Ricks, 1994, my emphasis). The first confusing aspect of this quotation is the confidence with which Maroney states the 'fact' of Brandon's transsexual status – a fact never actually corroborated – but then immediately claims that Brandon may have been a lesbian.

Two contradictory positions, one 'possible' and one apparently factual, seem to be implied at one and the same time. The use of the female pronoun for Brandon subsequently, however, seems to undermine the 'fact' of his transsexualism by denying the possibility of Brandon's male gender identity. This misuse of language is apparent earlier in the article when Brandon is described as 'a transsexual who had successfully passed as a male in the nearby town of Falls City, where *she* had been going by the name of Brandon Teena' (Ricks, 1994, my emphasis). Not only is Brandon's apparently undeniable transsexual status undermined through the rhetoric of the article, but there also seems to be an implicit incredulity at Brandon's ability to 'pass' as a man.

Throughout much of this article Brandon's sexual identity fluctuates between transsexual and female due to the contradictions of the language used. His transsexual status is claimed, only then to be undermined by implicit reference to his female body via language. It seems that here, as before, the body is the site of Brandon's 'true' sexual identity. The problem seems to be more linguistically based, however, as the complications of Brandon's possible subject positions cannot be adequately surmised within existing terminology. One offensive and uninformed 'solution' to this dilemma is quoted by FTM International when Sheriff Laux is quoted as saying of Brandon 'you can call it "it" as far as I'm concerned' (Gabriel, 1995).

Within the same article it is evident that the author, Davina Anne

Gabriel, claims Brandon as a transsexual man, explaining that Brandon ‘moved to Humboldt in 1994, shortly after beginning to live full-time as a man in preparation for eventual sex-change surgery’ (Gabriel, 1995). However, this is by no means the final word on Brandon’s gender identity as it is unclear how Brandon himself felt about his gender identity beyond the desire to be treated as a man. This desire does not necessarily signal transsexuality, as, under the technical definition of transsexuality, it is the desire for surgery that classifies a person as a transsexual.⁹ It is unclear, however, whether Brandon desired surgery and hormone treatment. In the first 20 minutes of the film, *Boys Don’t Cry*, director Kimberly Pierce includes a scene where Brandon, having woken up in Falls City after a drunken first night, states that he is not interested in such a programme of change (Pierce, 1999). Obviously this is not to be taken as a statement of fact, but such a scene would tend to indicate that, subsequent to her research, Pierce at least felt that this was a possibility.

At this point, then, it is worth turning both to the media reports of *Boys Don’t Cry*, and the film itself, in order to illuminate and expand on the issue of gender identity and Brandon Teena. In an extension of the article written for FTM International, Gabriel expresses concerns over the project of filming Brandon’s story, stating that ‘[t]ransgender activists are also concerned because there are people proceeding with book and movie projects on this case who see Brandon Teena as girl who liked to dress up like a boy’ (Gabriel, 1996). As with the reports about the murder investigation, the worry here is that Brandon will be misrepresented as a cross-dresser, rather than, as Gabriel believes, a transsexual. However, this worry over misrepresentation, as has been stated, could just as easily be applied to Gabriel’s summation of Brandon’s gender identity as that of a transsexual man. The worry here is with reading Brandon as a cross-dresser, but this possible misreading can be mirrored by reading Brandon as a transsexual when, in the absence of Brandon himself, it is unclear exactly how Brandon experienced his gender identity, and how he reconciled this with his body.

The director of *Boys Don’t Cry*, Kimberly Pierce, knew of part of this dilemma and undertook a series of interviews with friends of Brandon, as well as various transgendered individuals, in order to piece together a montage of possibilities (Gill, 2000a: 10; www.boysdontcry.co.uk). She attempted to get as many different perspectives as possible, which in itself may account for the number of possible readings of the film. Perhaps the best example of how difficult it was to define Brandon comes when Pierce explains that Lana – Brandon’s girlfriend at the time of his murder – claimed variously that ‘Brandon was a girl’, and ‘Brandon didn’t need a sex change, he was always a man to me’ (Brockes, 2000: 8). Pierce explains that ‘[w]hether Brandon is a boy or girl changes for Lana, sentence by

sentence' (Brockes, 2000: 8), and this fluctuation, partially mirrored in the celluloid representation of Brandon, results in the confused reviews of Brandon's character by critics of the film.

The overwhelming majority of film reviews praise the picture, the actors and the director, but as with the reportage of the murders, there is confusion over the classification, in both gender and sexual terms, of the main character that the film represents. In an article for *The Guardian*, Emma Brockes explains that the film is about 'a transsexual, a girl who passed herself off as a boy' (2000: 8), whereas for Dana Kennedy, writing in *The Observer*, the film concerns itself with 'Teena Brandon, a 20-year-old woman who calls herself Brandon Teena and pretends to be a man' (Kennedy, 2000: 6). The first issue that needs to be raised by these reviews is the apparent misunderstanding of the terms involved, as well as the complicated situation of Brandon.

For Brockes, Brandon is a transsexual, but one that 'passes herself off as a boy', thus misunderstanding what it means to be a transsexual and confusing this with the notion of cross-dressing and passing. Brockes believes that Brandon is a girl, who pretends to be a boy, and does so successfully, however, such a person may simply be a passing woman and is not necessarily a transsexual person. The reason for this misunderstanding is that, for Brockes, the body is the site of 'true' gender identity, and as such Brandon must be a girl. The same logic seems to function for Kennedy where Brandon is not even afforded classification as a transsexual person, rather he is a woman who simply hides his body and 'pretends to be a man'. For neither of these reviewers is Brandon's male gender identity anything other than a performance, a mask, or a deception, and it is this deception that leads to his death.

One article that, at first, seems to acknowledge the complexity of Brandon's gender identity is 'The Wrong Trousers' by Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian*. Bradshaw explains that 'Brandon Teena considers herself to be a man, and Lana feels the same way, even when the truth is revealed' (Bradshaw, 2000: 4). Once again, it is evident through the rhetoric of the article that the body is deemed to be the site of 'truth' about Brandon's identity, regardless of his self-definition. While Brandon's desire to be perceived as a man is acknowledged, something which is lacking in other reviews of the film, the article constantly refers to Brandon with female pronouns, thus undermining Brandon's male gender identity in the same way as the murder reports examined earlier. In other words, while Bradshaw seems to agree that Brandon is a man, he none the less refers to him as 'she' throughout.

A further issue that is raised by Bradshaw's article is the issue of choice. Bradshaw explains that 'Brandon has entered into the male role of heterosexual love more intensely, more fervently, than any biological male could,

because this is what Brandon has *chosen*' (2000: 4, my emphasis). It is questionable whether Brandon has a choice with regard to his gender identity, after all, why would he *choose* such a dangerous, lonely and difficult one? The argument, here, runs along similar lines to those who claim sexuality to be a simple choice between hetero- and homosexual; one must question why, if such a choice existed, would people choose the more difficult path?¹⁰

Furthermore, Bradshaw points out what he deems to be a weakness in the film, namely the lack of any reference to 'Brandon's existence before she [sic] found fulfilment in the role of a man' (2000: 4). However, it is questionable why this is necessary, except to make it easier to classify Brandon as a transsexual person, and easier to position the viewer in relation to a definite subject position for Brandon. Such a historical narrative would make the film a transsexual film rather than one that questions the structures of gender themselves, a questioning which surely must be in place given the questions concerning Brandon's gendered identity outlined earlier.

In some more in-depth articles on *Boys Don't Cry*, these issues of identity, gender and the body are explored in greater detail. In *The Sunday Times*, for example, Garth Pearce sets up the problem of Brandon and identities through his interview with Hilary Swank, the actress who played Brandon. Swank seems to understand the complexities of Brandon and other transgendered people when she explains that it 'was important for me not to define him [Brandon] as a lesbian . . . I think he was transgendered and just never got round to having a sex change' (Pearce, 2000: 4). However, through the rhetoric of the article, Pearce again exposes his own assumptions, and normalizes the traditional gender binary. He explains that the film 'tells the disturbing story of a male locked in a female body. Swank makes love to another woman, gets raped by two men and suffers horrible violence . . . Swank is a strikingly beautiful woman, married . . . [and u]ntil she started work on *Boys Don't Cry* she had long hair, wore designer dresses and was appreciated . . . for her on-screen glamour' (Pearce, 2000: 4). The first worrying aspect of this quotation is the apparent slippage between the real and celluloid worlds where it is not Brandon that is raped and killed, but Swank. The second issue is the apparent urgency that Pearce feels regarding the need to underline that Swank is a 'normal girl' really, while also titillating the reader by focusing on the sexual aspect of the film.

Throughout the article constant references are made to Swank's female body, her feminine attire and her difference from her on-screen character, as if this was the most important distinction in the world.¹¹ Swank, at one point, seems to capitulate, albeit uncharacteristically, with this normalization of her femininity by stating that on her days off she 'would put on

some make-up and try to be normal' (Pearce, 2000: 4). The implication being that Brandon was not normal, and not normal in a way that could threaten the normality of Swank herself. Indeed she explains that 'it seemed as if I was floating somewhere between masculinity and femininity . . . we [Swank and her husband] never made love during these [on set] visits because it did not feel right' (Pearce, 2000: 4).

The dominance of these assurances of Swank's 'normal' femininity simply reinforces the notion that there was something 'wrong' or 'abnormal' about Brandon's position. This rejection of the complexity of Brandon's gender identity is what leads to the apparent need to classify Brandon as either a passing lesbian or a transsexual man. If Brandon is allowed to exist both in reality and on film as a transgendered individual then the classificatory system of gender breaks down, resulting in the possibility of 'floating somewhere between masculinity and femininity', a possibility shown in Pearce's article to be perceived as dangerous.

This fear of losing the ground of femininity is mirrored in Carol Allen's article for *The Times*, 'Man, She Feels Like a Woman', where Allen mentions the apparently incredible way that 'Swank has managed to reclaim her femininity' (Allen, 2000: 2) as if this were the only troubling aspect of the film process. The usual linguistic devices are in play in this article to re-affirm Brandon's female body, regardless of his male gender identity, but further to this, Allen notes almost incredulously that 'Swank uses the male pronoun to refer to Brandon – she did so again in her Oscar acceptance speech' (2000: 2). Allen apparently misses the point that, firstly, Swank is merely complying with Brandon's wishes regarding his gender identity and that; secondly, this is based on the sort of extensive research expected of an actor playing a part based on someone's life.

Swank explains further how she experienced part of Brandon's position while filming, stating that '[t]here were people who thought I was a boy, but there were also people who couldn't figure out what I was . . . I learnt that if you don't fit into that stereotypical boy or girl definition then you are excluded, you are ignored, and that can be a very lonely place' (Allen, 2000: 2). Rather than pick up on the issues of the apparent invisibility of transgendered subjects, or expectations of gender and the problem of existence between genders, Allen simply describes Swank as a 'glamorous young woman in the mustard-coloured ballgown' (2000: 2), again underlining the 'normal femininity' of Swank.

One of the very few mainstream articles that deals with the possibilities of the film in a more informed, less sensationalist manner, is 'It's A Mixed-Up Muddled-Up Shook-Up World' by Adam Mars-Jones in *The Times*. Mars-Jones explains that 'the film's female lead as well as the male demonstrated that femininity is an arbitrary notion' (Mars-Jones, 2000: 2) and provides clear synopses of the two main possible readings of the film; firstly

that Brandon is a man whose identity is ‘brutally rejected by biology’, and secondly that Brandon is ‘a woman who loved women but had absorbed her culture’s horror of lesbianism, and so had to come up with a different story about her desires’ (2000: 2). Interestingly, Mars-Jones switches gendered pronouns depending on the reading of the film, giving credibility to both readings and allowing the confused nature of Brandon’s subject position to remain intact whilst also questioning the need to categorize Brandon’s position as one *or* the other. This noted, however, Mars-Jones points out markers within the film that seem to lean more towards a lesbian reading of the film, specifically the sex scene between Brandon and Lana, after the rape, that Pierce adds to the film.

While there are plenty of scenes within the film that can be extracted to support both lesbian and transsexual readings, this scene is particularly noteworthy as it is a dramatic insertion by the director, rather than a recreation of actual events, indicating that it guides the viewer’s reading. Mars-Jones explains that the scene is

a tempting scene to insert in dramatic terms – the irony of Brandon finally able to love and be loved as Teena, learning to live without deception just before *her deception* is brutally punished. But it feels impertinent to impose a narrative of healing at such a late stage on to this gruelling and compelling film. (2000: 2, my emphasis)

What this quotation exposes, however, is that Mars-Jones has already decided that the body is the site of truth concerning Brandon’s gender, and the male persona that Brandon portrays is only artifice.

The scene itself is one that, at first, seems to suppress confusion over Brandon’s identity, the implication being that Brandon and Lana make love as two women, thereby giving credence to the lesbian reading of the film. This reading, however, relies on the reader filling in the gap between the two characters meeting in the barn and the subsequent, importantly absent, sex scene. The absent presence of this possible closure makes the film more compelling given that it is entirely up to the viewer how Brandon’s identity is reconciled with his biology, and indeed how this closure of classification is reconciled for Lana. Pierce explains that

[t]he rape has destroyed his [Brandon’s] male identity . . . but I’m not saying that Brandon was a girl with Lana . . . Does Brandon make love to Lana then as a boy or a girl? Again, that’s not for me to fill in. If you want to read that scene as two women together, I give the audience license to read it as they need to’. (Gill, 2000a: 12)

The reason for the insertion of the scene, according to Pierce, was to provide Brandon with a deeper sense of himself; however, whether this was necessary is debatable. Certainly the scene tends to give weight to the

lesbian reading of the film in the absence of any explanation to the layer-son of how two biologically female bodies could have sex as anything other than two women.¹² However, given that the film is a tragic love story, rather than a bio-pic, and given that Pierce wants to allow the viewer licence to decide how to read Brandon and the film, one could argue that this scene is simply an attempt to continue the confusion of gender and sexual categories and question the need to fix Brandon's identity.

The dialogue, however, returns the viewer to the relative safety of a lesbian reading when Lana says to Brandon 'You're so pretty', using the feminine adjective 'pretty' in contrast to the masculine 'handsome' term used previously by Lana's mother to describe Brandon, thereby feminizing Brandon himself. Obviously these terms are only gendered by culture, but this is precisely the reason why their use confers notions of femininity to the viewer or listener. On top of this seemingly innocuous use of language, however, the discussion that ensues seems to set up the 'Brandon as confused lesbian' reading of the film.

Lana: What were you like before all this? Were you like me, a girl-girl?

Brandon: Yeah, a long time ago. Then I guess I was just like a boy-girl.

This is an interesting segment of the film, however, as the use of the terms 'girl-girl' and 'boy-girl' allow an understanding of the inadequacies of language as a classification system, and underline the possibility of using the cultural terms currently available in a deliberately contradictory frame. The subversive possibility inherent in renaming, reclassifying or troubling the classificatory terms available for the subject in this way is a point that should be noted. Also, it is worth pointing out that this use of the term 'boy', both here and within the title of the film, could help to underline the gender binary through excluding Brandon's subject position as other.

The film tells us that it is wrong to rape and murder transsexuals. True, but not very helpful in that the vast majority of people who are unclear about this are probably not going to be persuaded by the film. Very unhelpfully, the film also maintains the traditional gender binary between men and women by creating a separate category 'boy,' or more accurately 'boy,' which is filled only by a biological female who refuses to act as either a woman (a group the film defines as hopelessly immature ultra-feminine beings) or a lesbian. Within this film, as within most of American culture, one is a boy if one lacks the power and authority of patriarchal manhood. But within the film there are no boys other than Brandon Teena. (Siegel, 2003: 25)

Furthermore, the notion of Brandon's body as 'truth' within the film is again underlined here as the celluloid Brandon describes himself as a 'boy-girl'; a girl who plays at being a boy, perhaps, but no longer simply a 'boy', or a 'man'.

Furthermore, this section of the film continues to indicate a lesbian reading of the film, and Brandon's body, as the dialogue of the unfolding sex scene indicates that Lana is to have sex with Brandon in a manner that is different for her to having sex with a man.

Lana: I don't know if I'm gonna know how to do it.

Brandon: I'm sure you'll figure it out.

The fact that Brandon then takes off his top indicates that the body is exposed, the 'truth' is out, and the scene becomes a sex scene between two women. If one also remembers the previous sex scene, where Lana notices Brandon's bound breasts, there is an implication that Lana knows Brandon's biology and that, while she may have 'fooled' herself into believing that Brandon was a man the first time, this time the sex is between two biological women.

The scene that follows the barn sex scene also indicates a somatic shift for Lana when she asks if Brandon has changed his hair. Lana looks at Brandon as if seeing him for the first time, and shies away from his kiss. It is possible to read this as an indication that Lana realizes something about herself that she does not like, again implying a lesbian reading of the film in line with traditional narratives of discovery and shame. Of course this is only conjecture, but based on an appreciation for traditional tropes of lesbian film construction. The suggestion here is that this section of the film closes off any gender ambiguity by providing signifiers of lesbian desire and guilt, and by exposing the 'truth' of Brandon's body within a sexual scenario where the methods of 'deception' such as chest binding and packing are removed.

Furthermore, and more importantly, the opening scenes render any possible gender confusion almost obsolete. The very first scenes show the 'deceptions' in progress with the viewer being shown Brandon having his hair cut, and packing his jeans. The scene closes off the possibility of reading Brandon as anything other than a cross-dresser, or a dyke. Had the film started with Brandon meeting his blind date, the confusion that Pierce wanted to provide may have been more plausible. The 'fact' that Brandon is not a boy is underscored further when he argues with his cousin, Lonny.

Lonny: You're not a boy, that is what went wrong; you are not a boy.

Brandon: Tell them that. They say I'm the best boyfriend they ever had.

Even when Brandon argues with Lonny, replying to the question 'Why don't you just admit that you're a dyke?' by stating 'Because I'm not a dyke', it is difficult to agree with him, given the celluloid construction given within the opening sequences. The analogous scene to this opening

sequence provided about 30 minutes later, when Brandon is seen binding his breasts and packing in front of a mirror, again closes off the possibility of any gender ambiguity in the face of the ‘truth’ of his body. It is my contention that this ‘truth’ is constantly underscored, albeit (possibly) unintentionally, throughout the film, and therefore the possibility of reading the celluloid Brandon as a trans man is foreclosed.

This concern over the apparent closure of Brandon’s sexuality and gender noted, Pierce claims that the intention was precisely to leave the two possible readings of Brandon open, which I would argue is not possible from the outset of the film. Within Erin Gill’s interview with director Kimberly Pierce published in British lesbian magazine *Diva*, Pierce explains that the two possible readings of Brandon, and the film, are deliberately left open to interpretation.

I wanted to make Brandon as realistic as he could be, without calling him a butch lesbian or a transsexual or any of that. I wanted him to be a dramatic character . . . There are two strands – do you want to be a man or do you want to sleep with women? They’re not separate, but imagine that they are. Which came first? . . . I’m not going to tell you which one came first . . . I try to touch on gender in the way that I know Brandon touched on it throughout his life. I know that Brandon . . . tried to identify himself in a number of ways . . . he was grasping for categories . . . he used language to make himself acceptable. (Gill, 2000a: 11)

This quotation and the issues raised by both Brandon and the celluloid representation of his life outlined within this article, point out several things.

Firstly that Pierce wants the two possible readings of the film to be left open to the viewer to decide upon. I would suggest, however, that there is a form of closure in the film concerning the identity of Brandon, thereby misrepresenting Brandon’s varied possible identities. Secondly the issues of gender and sexuality are intrinsically and necessarily linked. I would suggest, then, that these issues need to be the subject of examination and interrogation with a view to understanding gender through sexuality and especially those sexual practices that challenge notions of gender such as daddy-boy play and other queer erotic formulations.¹³ And thirdly, the importance of language is underlined not only as a method of restrictive classification, as discussion of the aforementioned articles has shown, but also as an enabling and creative method that, if manipulated, could provide gender classifications beyond simply male and female. All of these issues are ones that academic theorization has attempted to tackle in various ways, but it is through the recent emergence of queer theory and transgender theory that they have become so prominent, and through which such an interrogation of assumptions, rhetoric and representation may take place.

This article, as I have stated, focuses on media reportage and rhetorical devices, which I claim function to deny transgendered subjectivity: in this instance, of Brandon Teena. I would contend, further, that these rhetorical devices are in play in a multitude of cultural locations; including the academy. The example of Janice Raymond provided at the outset of this article shows that the linguistic challenge for trans people extends far beyond just the personal, and is evident in multiple discourses where the body, identity and notions of ‘truth’ come into play. Language holds significant subversive and political power, however ‘the political challenge is to seize *language* as the means of representation *and* production, to treat it as an instrument that invariably constructs the field of bodies and that ought to be used to deconstruct and reconstruct bodies outside the oppressive categories of sex’ (Butler, 1990: 125, emphasis in original). The idea of using language to reconstruct notions of gender is intriguing to say the least, and is being used both within the academy and the trans community. The challenge – which is already being taken up – is for the trans community to engage with linguistic and rhetorical devices and challenge the assumption that gender and identity can be so easily described, denied and/or deconstructed.

Notes

1. See various publications concerning representations of lesbianism, and homosexuality in general, in mainstream media. For example, Jeffrey Ringer (1994) *Queer Words, Queer Images: Communication and the Construction of Homosexuality*, Vito Russo (1987) *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*.
2. Throughout this article Brandon Teena will be referred to via his chosen first name, Brandon, rather than via his surname. Similarly, male pronouns will be used to refer to Brandon throughout. I am not claiming to know Brandon’s gender through this usage, merely complying with what seems to be his wishes regarding his gender identity.
3. Obviously it is not possible to critically analyse every media article that concerns itself with Brandon and the film *Boys Don’t Cry*, and as such I only consider a selection. Some further articles not commented upon in this essay include French (2000), Gill (2000b), Giltz (2000), Leigh (2000), McPhilemy (2000) and Stuart (1999).
4. Obviously transgender existence is not unique to this historical or cultural era. See, for examples, Leslie Feinberg (1996) *Transgendered Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*.
5. For a more detailed exposition of the problem that transsexual subject positions pose for queer theory see Jay Prosser, 1998: especially chapter 2.
6. See, for example, Germaine Greer (2000) *The Whole Woman* especially pp. 80–93. See also Willox and Morland (2004).
7. This is not to suggest that surgically altered bodies should be universally and unquestionably accepted post-operationally. For example intersexed persons

might wish to challenge the implications of surgical construction of bodies by medical practitioners, and may claim gender identities for political, rather than biological, reasons. 'If I label my postsurgical anatomy female, I ascribe to surgeons the power to create a woman by removing body parts' (Cheryl Chase quoted in Iain Morland, 2001a: 99, emphasis in original. See also Morland, 2001b). My thanks go to Iain Morland for discussions on this matter.

8. For more information on the actions and aims of The Transsexual Menace see Riki Anne Wilckins (1997) *Read My Lips: Sexual Subversion and The End of Gender*.
9. This is based on the questionable definition of transsexuality as desire for sex reassignment surgery, rather than a definition of transgender – again open to debate – where surgery is either not necessary or not desired for various reasons. Such definitions are difficult to qualify, and quite possibly undesirable, yet for the purposes of this article such a 'surgical separation' is assumed.
10. This is not to deny the complexity of the discussions surrounding sexuality, choice and 'nature', merely to point out the issues are similar. This issue is, of course, different to that of choosing the identity or label of queer where a political choice is made.
11. This fear of Swank losing her femininity is still evident in interviews and articles written three years after the release of the film. See, for example, Chrissy Iley's interview for *Glamour* magazine where the fear of Swank losing her femininity is evident in the lead of the interview, where Iley explains that she is 'not quite prepared for how girlie she is in the flesh' (Iley, 2002: 88). The first question asked is not about Swank's recent film roles, or her acting career, but rather is a reassurance for Iley and readers alike that 'You're a real girls' girl, aren't you?' (Iley, 2002: 90). The images that accompany the article also emphasize Swank's coherent feminine-female gender identity, making her look remarkably like Julia Roberts and showing her in traditional 'girl's girl' attire.
12. For discussion of alternative possibilities, see Jacob Hale (1997), Annabelle Willox (forthcoming) and Amalia Ziv (2002).
13. See note 12.

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Biographical Note

Dr. Annabelle Willox holds degrees in Philosophy, Sexual Politics, and Critical and Cultural Theory from Cardiff University. Her doctoral dissertation is on transgender, epistemology and queer theory: it argues that phenomenology provides a more philosophically robust and politicized understanding of gender identity than performativity. She is jointly editing, with Iain Morland, the Queer Theory volume in the *Readers in Cultural Criticism Series* (Palgrave, forthcoming), and has taught at Cardiff and Glamorgan Universities. She has presented papers at various conferences throughout the UK and Ireland. Her current research interests include queer theory and/as politics, transgender, sexuality, field hockey and Manchester United. *Address*: Centre for Critical and Cultural Theory, University of Wales, Cardiff, PO Box 94, Cardiff, CF10 3XB. [email: willox@bigfoot.com]