

Transpeople in Performative Documentary: Self-Representation, Citizenship and Transparency

Introduction

In June 2015, *Vanity Fair* revealed their exclusive story of transgender celebrity Caitlyn Jenner with the claim, “Few recent stories have gripped the public imagination as much as Bruce Jenner’s journey from Olympic icon to transgender woman” (Bissinger). Recording Jenner’s transcendent life story, including references to her participation in the reality television series *Keeping up with The Kardashians*, the *Vanity Fair* article offered a sense of social endorsement by including images taken by the celebrated photographer Annie Leibovitz. At the same time, Caitlyn’s appearance seemed to offer the “real life” version of the much-praised Amazon Prime drama *Transparent*, in its focus on an elder male member of society finally finding the confidence to go through gender and/or sexual transition. Nowhere was this more evident than in the reality television series *I am Cait* (see Figure 1), which frequently made reference to the *Vanity Fair* article in offering authenticity to Caitlyn’s emerging life as a transgender woman. In the series, Caitlyn forms new friendships and alliances in the manner of “families we choose” (Weston 1) as she socializes with new transgender friends of different classes and social standing, but she also experiences a learning curve (Breen 56) as audiences responded variably to her conservative politics. Caitlyn seemed to contribute to the zeitgeist, appearing as a documentary icon.¹

However, the appearance of Caitlyn cannot be considered in isolation. Not only did the drama *Transparent* help establish a welcoming popular cultural world, but many preceding texts in the documentary form have also nourished an appetite within the mainstream.²

Consequently this essay demonstrates how the appearance of “transpeople” as transgender and transsexual citizens within American, Canadian, and UK documentaries, provides new opportunities for self-representation and produces new models of “intimate citizenship” (Plummer 152). Such a process within filmic and televisual documentary challenges “an ethnographic film tradition that has sought to represent others [such as ethnic and sexual minorities, who] have been told they could not represent themselves” (Nichols 91). Varying formats of documentary and reality television offer new ways to record the diversity of transgender and transsexual social lives, rejecting the stereotype that transgender people are “deceivers” eliciting some culpability and the idea that they are deserved targets of transphobic violence, which in extreme cases leads to murder (Bettcher 43). As I have discussed in *LGBT Identity and Online New Media*, when 15 year old transgender youth Lawrence King was murdered in school in 2008, this was for his “deceptive” (yet innocent) identity as a possible Valentine’s Day romantic partner, eliminated by his imagined suitor, aged 14. At the same time popular culture has vividly represented the “deceptive” nature of transgender identity which might lead to punitive outcomes, specifically evident in biographical film *Boys Don’t Cry* which tells the story of female Teena Brandon, who was murdered for assuming a male identity.

This essay explores the work of documentary performers who challenge the troubling “rhetoric of deception” by focusing on transparency and full disclosure (Bettcher 47). The longitudinal documentary *A Change of Sex: George/Julia* and the docudrama *Paddington Green* offer new perspectives on celebrity and community; the documentaries *My Dad Diane* and *She’s a Boy I Knew* offer an exploration of domesticity and realism; the reality television shows *There is Something About Miriam* and *I am Cait*, alongside the documentary *Trantasia: Every Boy Has a Dream* reveal the significance of the “care of the self” and the

ability to parody the “deceptive rhetoric”; and the documentaries *Lucy: Teenage Transsexual*, *My Transsexual Summer*, and *Transsexual Teen: Beauty Queen* explore the notion of regular teens and surgical precedents. Although the analysis largely focuses on the performances of male to female transpeople, these texts reveal a changing cultural world for transgender and transsexual citizens within the media.³

Rather than reveal a coherent political position, these works explore a proliferation of diverse, if not competing, performative approaches that broaden the scope of the documentary form. As Richard Schechter suggests, “performativity points to a variety of topics, among them the construction of social reality, including gender and race” (110). By framing themselves as everyday citizens, transgender/transsexual documentary performers stimulate new ways of looking, which theoretically influence the formation of social identity itself.

Transgender/Transsexual Identity Issues

However, notions of transgender and transsexual identity do not easily fit with theories of gender and sexuality, or citizenship (see Munro and Warren 345), nor is there a binding political consensus.⁴ As Julie L. Nagoshi and Stephan/ie Brzuzy tell us:

Transgenders differ widely in their degree of belief in the fluidity of gender identity. Some accept such fluidity only to the extent that one can switch between two otherwise separate, essentialist, and pure gender categories, whereas others believe that an embodied gender identity is still highly malleable. ... Transexualism is defined as innate and biological, not chosen, therefore deserving both social and legal

recognitions. (432)

In basic terms, the notions of transgender and transsexual identity offer no simple relationship to gender performative rules or stereotypes, nor are they necessarily directly connected to issues of biological determination or aspects of innate sexual desire. Central within this is the imagined divide between notions of essentialist identity seemingly connected to biology implying adherence to gender identity and sexual behaviour norms. Conversely the transgressive potential of gender fluidity and sexual liberty foregrounds diversity rather than the norm.

As Nagoshi and Brzuzy developing their notion of transgender theory, they explain that

if someone's social identity is understood as being fixed or essential within a person, it can validate and justify sex, racial, class, and other differences as being "natural," which can ultimately reify the multiple systems of oppression. At the same time, questioning and destabilizing all social identities disintegrates an individual's sense of self within a socially oppressed group, even though such an identity can be the basis for personal empowerment to oppose social oppression. (412)

If a person transforms from male to female, or vice versa, the act of transformation may be transgressive, but, at the same time, that person is not necessarily questioning traditional gender roles. Often even those who transition adhere to archetypes of the natural and the dominant order, which does not always accommodate gender diversity.

Furthermore, issues of diversity and the norm are particularly complicated when considering the mainstream reception of individuals who might identify as transgender or

transsexual. Talia Mae Bettcher notably points out that

victims of transphobic violence can be subject to blame shifting through accusations of deception and ... transphobic violence may be understood ... related [to the] notions of “exposure,” “discovery,” “appearance,” and “reality.” (47)

Bettcher’s “rhetoric of deception,” where abusers justify their violence to transgender and transsexual individuals by equating notions of misrepresentation and deceit often proves central in cases of transphobic violence. For example, Bettcher considers the murder of Gwen Araujo in 2002 and the legal defence of the four perpetrators. The mother of one of the perpetrators testified, “If you find out that the beautiful woman that you are with is really a man, it would make any man go crazy” (qtd. in Bettcher 44). Such a contentious and abhorrent defence reveals the sexism, transphobia, and homophobia underlying justifications of violence and abjection aimed at transgendered and transsexual individuals. It is within these contexts that documentaries focus on transgender and transsexual identity, and many relate common narratives of violence or, at least, problems fitting in with regular society.

Transformation, Documentary, and Citizenship

The issue of gender dysphoria, the belief that your essential body is not in harmony with your sense of gender identity often accompanied by a desire to change sexes (see NHS), frequently leads to problems fitting in. Even though mainstream society seems to demonstrate little comprehension, it does exhibit a voyeuristic interest in gender dysphoria and the “rhetoric of deception” (Bettcher 47). Historically, the representation of the transgendered body within factual media has often relied on a disavowed but intense interest in the relationship between

masculine and feminine identities as well as the “problem” of gender transition. The supposed difficulty of achieving the sexual change in terms of “believability” often frames the representation of psychological problems for the individual undergoing change. An inherent narrative code within early documentaries is the focus on the trials and tribulations of transgender identity.

This is particularly evident in the representation of April Ashley, who is considered the first person in the UK to undergo gender realignment surgery. Even though she became an iconic subject of photographer David Baily in the 1960s (see Styles), Ashley was subject to an exposé in the *Sunday People* in 1961 that exposed details of her former identity as a man who worked in the merchant navy and discussed the revolutionary surgery that changed her sexual physiology. The article offered voyeuristic titillation concerning her “deceptive” identity as a female cabaret star and model to create tension between her identity as a beautiful woman and her existence as an outsider. In this way, the culture registered “disavowal” in the manner that Stuart Hall (223) explains: the attention that “others” are given, evident in the subjective interest in “difference” exhibited by the mainstream. However, those “others” are not accepted. Instead, they are subject to intense commodification as objects of entertainment.

Despite this commodification, April Ashley’s life has more recently been celebrated. She received an MBE in 2012 for services to transgender equality, and she has also been the subject of an art exhibition at the Museum of Liverpool recording her extraordinary life. But just like April Ashley’s transition was originally represented as deceptive in the press, early representations of transpeople in documentary television focussed on the problem of convincing surgery. This is particularly evident within the longitudinal documentary series *A Change of Sex: George and Julia*, which explores the 1979 sex change of George Roberts to

Julia Grant and her later life after her transformation (see Figure 2). The documentary series revealed, especially at the outset, the oppressive attitude of dominant society towards her.

The series presents the personal trial of George/Julia, particularly with regard to her needs to persuade the medical authorities as to her psychological suitability for sexual transition. Medical practitioners foreground the significance of normality in the documentary series, coding Julia as unsuitable or incomplete, in psychological and physical terms because of her gender dysphoria. Oppressive medical and scientific discourses frame the significance of gender coherence and the natural.

However, the representation of Julia offers a performative documentary potential, involving an “embodied practice,” which privileges the physical “body as [the] site of knowing” (Carlson 191). Although she needed to engage with institutions in order to achieve her transition, within the documentary series she used her transgendered body as a central context for narrative stimulation. In doing this she used her body to “resist conclusions, ... boundaries and limits” (Carlson 189), framing her body as a central narrative context, relating issues of fluidity and transition. As Bill Nichols has observed, contemporary “documentary has come to suggest incompleteness and uncertainty, recollection and impression, [framing] images of personal worlds and their subjective construction” (1).

The transgender performer may consequently be considered the co-producer of the text rather than the subject of an ethnographic project. This process of “new storytelling” for sexual diversity” (Pullen 12) facilitates a sense of self-reflexivity (Giddens 21) by framing the personal as much as the institutional as empowered to develop some performative documentary potential. The context of “intimate citizenship” is central here because of its potential to describe the diverse actions of seemingly disconnected social actors who are working towards democracy. As Ken Plummer explains,

Intimate Citizenship does not imply one model, one pattern [and] one way. On the contrary, it is a loose term which comes to designate a field of stories, an array of tellings, out of which new lives, new communities and new politics may emerge. (152)

Such a “field of stories” within performative documentary may be considered to offer new scope for transpeople, framing the personal as political and indicating the production of new citizenship identities. At the same time, the “anthropological unconsciousness,” which Nichols maintains upholds documentary conventions involving “whiteness, maleness, [the] body of the observer, the experimental [and the] canonical conventions of western narrative,” (65) becomes less important, and the individual is given more power through framing their self-reflexive identity.

Celebrity and Community: *A Change of Sex: George and Julia* and *Paddington Green*

Notably celebrities such as April Ashley, Amanda Lear, and Tula (Caroline Cossey) have challenged the primacy of normative cisgender performances.⁵ All of these individuals have achieved high profile status in the media as male-to-female transgender celebrities. Lear, a singer, was intimately connected to Salvador Dali (see her book *My Life with Dali*) and Tula, a model, appeared as a Bond girl “extra” in the film *For Your Eyes Only*. Such attention is also apparent in the more recent lives of celebrated male-to-female transsexuals. Nadia Almada, for example, won the reality TV show *Big Brother* by popular vote, and Candice Cayne⁶ appeared as a leading character in the popular television drama *Dirty Sexy Money*. However, adherences to standards of ideal beauty and an expectation to be glamorous confine these popular cultural representations. Although they advance the narrative possibilities by

rejecting an adherence to dominant medical and psychological institutional concerns, they are limited in their approach to gender diversity. This is evident in an adherence to stereotypical notions of heterosexual female gender identity.

Such a focus on the problem of stereotypes or hierarchy was reflected in the longitudinal documentary *A Change of Sex: George and Julia*, which at the outset focused on Julia's sex change in mostly physical terms. Revealing her isolation as the victim of poor surgery in the construction of her vagina and the partial reversion of her operation, led Julia's gender transition to be seen as "unsatisfactory," suggesting that she had an unfulfilled sex life.

Whilst the story of George/Julia appeared on British television offering an enduring celebrity relationship with the audience over a fourteen-year period (or at least presented itself in this way), her narrative mostly focused on rejection and institutional abjection. George/Julia's unsatisfactory gender transition may have been represented in this way, but it also helped expose and address issues of cultural and social oppression (and the institutional mechanisms of rejection). As the series develops, we focus less on her problems in transition and more on her personal life and her discontent with the medical institution. While she the series depicts her as subject to medical and moral institutional evaluations, Julia herself becomes increasingly confident as a self-reflexive storyteller, providing an engaging address to the mainstream. The media producers of the series ultimately adopt a positivist "citizen oriented" approach, attempting to "normalise" transgender life. The approach changes the narrative from addressing issues of pathologisation and abject subjectivity to representing George/Julia as an everyday person attempting to find love and make a living.

Such citizenship potential is also evident in the later docudrama television series *Paddington Green*, which represents a transgender male-to-female member of the public

within the local community (see Figure 3). The appearance of Jackie McAuliffe, however, seems stereotypical. Jackie is presented as a prostitute, attempting to make a living in a world where she cannot easily gain employment. However, she desires to use her job as a prostitute to fund additional surgical changes to her body. In this series, the body is a physical resource that can be used as a commodity. At the same time, Jackie needs to escape from a world where she is trapped by the limits of her physical form. The series indicates the possibility of her escape by foregrounding Jackie's ability as a musician. Jackie can use the opportunity of the television series to gain celebrity status, and eventually she receives a recording contract. Jackie's prospects in *Paddington Green* may be related to the notion of salvage. She saves herself from her life as a prostitute by returning to her artistic skills as a musician, in some senses giving back to community.

While Jackie is represented as deserving to be part of community, there is little focus on her family or the context of her fitting into a family. Although *Paddington Green* relies on the reality television docudrama format in many ways, often representing a range of isolated yet connected neighbours living in an urban community, Jackie's identity as an outsider nevertheless forms a central focus of the narrative. In comparison, *My Dad Diane* and *She's a Boy I Knew* frame the transgender individual as central storytellers within a family and to some degree a larger community.

Domesticity and Realism in *My Dad Diane* and *She's a Boy I Knew*

Although they employ entirely different documentary formats, *My Dad Diane* and *She's a Boy I Knew* offer similar domestic visions of family connection and support. The former is a television documentary narrated by the teenage son of Diane, a post-operative transsexual. It

explores Diane's "extraordinary" family life (with two mums). On the other hand, *She's a Boy I Knew* is a cinematic documentary directed, edited, and produced by Gwen Haworth (formerly Steve) offering a self-reflexive focus on her own transition. However, by foregrounding the iconography of the home movie and the family photo album, both documentaries offer visions of normalcy involving deeply felt and occasionally light-hearted emotional contexts in the manner of "intimate citizenship." The juxtaposition of images from past lives alongside those relating recent transformations allows past and present narratives to co-exist within a domestic setting. In *She's a Boy I Knew* images of home movies and family photos of childhood and early adult hood accompany Gwen's discussions of personal feelings of discontent in her earlier life and the move to transition. This juxtaposition is particularly stark in the images of Gwen's childhood. Those family photos exemplify the young, often shown dressed in stereotypical clothing that affirms the normative binary gendered world. In the company of her family, Gwen expresses her inner feelings as a child who was aware at that time of her gender dysphoria but was unable to communicate this condition.

Additionally, Gwen discusses her previous marriage to a female partner and how she similarly was unable to tell her wife of her psychological state at the time of their union. The discussions of both childhood and marriage are accompanied by family photos depicting those times, which lends a sense of therapy to the scenes as Gwen and her family seem to come to terms with the past and the present. Gwen's family and friends seem to understand her journey, unconditionally supporting her new identity as part of their shared domestic world.

This domestic imagery is used in a social constructivist manner, which allows the transgendered documentary performers to question the fixity of gender roles and reveals their ability to exhibit both male and female gender identities. Both *She's a Boy I Knew* and *My*

Dad Diane provide early images of stereotypically masculinised previous lives, revealing Gwen Haworth (in the former) as excelling in the masculine sport of ice hockey and Diane (in the latter) as familiar with handling guns. At the same time, contemporary images of Gwen and Diane blur gender categories. Gwen retains her “Adam’s apple,” explaining that it serves as a reminder of her previous life, and Diane continues to perform the masculine and “husband oriented” chores about the household, such as using a chainsaw and erecting a wind turbine. Also, in terms of apparel, Gwen adopts an androgynous fashion and Diane adorns practical and comfortable hippy-style clothing (see Figure 4). Both suggest non-conformity to stereotypical notions of female fashion and glamour in their clothing choices. Further, Gwen and Diane both identify themselves as lesbians, displaying no interest as women in heterosexual desire. *She’s a Boy I Knew* and *My Dad Diane* seem to reject the idea of a complete transition, questioning the hierarchy of sexuality and gender based essentialist forms.

Care of the Self and Parodying Deception in *There is Something About Miriam, Trantasia* and *I am Cait*

It is possible to suggest that *There is Something About Miriam, Trantasia*, and *I am Cait* contradict these ideas because of the way in which they offer hyper representations of glamorised and sexualised feminine identity, but there is an ambivalence in the way these works think through gender and sexuality divisions. Their carnivalesque appears in how they frame issues of hybridity (see Stallybrass and White 58) to challenge notions of fixed identity. These documentaries also evince what Michel Foucault’s calls “care of the self” (7), where responsible citizens give of themselves selflessly in the service and enlightenment of

the larger society. In fact, documentaries like *Theirs is Something About Miriam* actually parody the “rhetoric of deception” through the format of reality television by foregrounding the life chances of their transgendered performers.

There is Something About Miriam is a reality television dating contestant starring a glamorous female called Miriam who is represented as desirable to “red blooded” heterosexual men. However there is a ‘format twist’ in the production of the series. While the audience are alerted that Miriam is a male- to- female transgendered person who has had “partial” surgery on her body, and still retains the male sexual organ, the participating contestants are not aware of this until the finale. The “something” about Miriam was her potentially surprising and maybe threatening penis. Unfortunately, when the contestants discovered the format twist at the close of the series, they filed a lawsuit against the producers (Sky). Their suit follows Bettcher’s argument that individuals might express rage at having “been deceived” (47), often demonstrating “transphobic hostility, interwoven ... with homophobic and possibly sexist attitudes” (47). In order for Sky to broadcast the program, they had to pay a financial award for this alleged deception (Deans, “Contestants in transsexual show to sue Sky”). Despite this incongruous setting in an apparently low standard reality “freak” show, *There is Something About Miriam* uses the deception trope as a parody, or ruse, to break down cultural barriers.

Although the series repeatedly employs gratuitous low angle camera shots which foreground Miriam’s crotch area, stimulating the “rhetoric of deception” (Bettcher 47) evident in the hidden male sexual organ, the discourse ultimately foregrounds Miriam’s story of individuality and her personal triumph. Although the finale is punctuated with “inappropriate” responses from the contestants who laugh at the spectacle of Tom (the winner) as he had expressed a “genuine” physical and emotional connection to Miriam, this is

framed as awkward or unpleasant, evident in reverse shots that clarify the disrespect. This disrespect appears more clearly when Tom eventually declines the winner's prize of £10,000 and the opportunity to embark on a boating holiday with Miriam (after he had initially accepted the reward – in the presence of peers). He codes Miriam as abject, telling the audience that he has no respect for “him.” Tom is represented negatively as bitter and unenlightened rather than as educated and understanding. In contrast, Miriam closes the narrative, revealing her superior humanity and her deservedness of true love. She tells us that she is content to remain unfixed in male or female sexual identity and that even though she has been the recipient of rejection many times, she can understand the “humiliating” responses of the cast and the bitter rejection of Tom. She is a real person, and she warns, “you should not judge a book by its cover.”

Whereas *There is Something About Miriam* employs a format twist to reveal a tension between gender identities and exposes those who might be deceived as foolish, *Trantasia: Every Boy Has a Dream* and *I am Cait* offer more transparency. *Trantasia* presents the world's first ever “Most beautiful Transsexual pageant.” Set in Las Vegas, the series presents an array of glamorous transgendered male-to-female people, some of whom tell us they “were setting the standards” of transsexual beauty. *Trantasia* offers a celebration of transsexual and transgendered life. However, a sense of duality appears in discussions of past and present lives, relating some sense of transformation or improvement in their current state. *I am Cait* similarly frames the duality of identity, evident in continual references to Caitlyn's former life as Olympic athlete Bruce Jenner, who was a recurring presence on the reality show *Keeping up with the Kardashians*.

Notions of former and current lives are also evident in *Trantasia* where Maria appears on the web site for the film in a transition morph, changing from a family snapshot of a

wholesome and handsome young man with hands in pockets (suggesting attendance or waiting) into a staged image of a glamorous and sophisticated woman with one hand proffered forward (suggesting agency). This graphic is captioned with the text “every boy has a dream” (the subtitle of the film). Transition or duality is also present in *I am Cait*’s references to Caitlyn retaining a deep masculine voice and as yet not seeking vocal coaching, offering a complex mixture of gender identities. As discussed above, Caitlyn appears as a highly feminine and glamorous woman who was photographed for the cover of *Vanity Fair*. Yet at the same time her identity as Bruce remains evident not only in her masculine voice but also in the representation of her enduring interest in fast sports cars and technology. Such a representation offers a type of co-presence through duality, combining Caitlyn and Bruce as one “hybrid” identity in the manner of “intimate citizenship.”

I am Cait and *Trantasia* specifically focus on the notion of valued citizenship and ultimately the “care of the self,” which Foucault suggested might be working on the “project of the self” for the benefit of others and community. He tells us that

care of the self is ethical in itself, but it implies complex relations with others, in the measure where this ethos of freedom is also a way of caring for others. ... Ethos implies also a relation with others to the extent that care for self renders one competent to occupy a place in the city, in the community or in interindividual relationships which are proper – whether to exercise a magistracy or to have friendly relationships. (7)

Exploring the context of ancient philosophers, Foucault considers the potential for the individual to contribute to society. This might frame an “ethics of the self” by following “ethical” ideologies as part of a process of self-improvement, making oneself competent or qualified or valued as an ideal citizen or as a role model.

For example, the representation of Maria within *Trantasia* (who was not the eventual winner of the pageant, but one of the runners-up) focusses less on her aesthetic sexual transition and more on her politicised and humanitarian identity. Not only is she represented as receiving an award for AIDS charity outreach work, but we also see her on the streets of Los Angeles doing this work. Maria represents not only a transition in aesthetic form but also a transition in life chances, revealing a focus on realism and social commitment.

In contrast, the representation of Caitlyn Jenner in *I am Cait* seems to reveal her life of privilege, evident in her status as a wealthy celebrity, there is also a focus on learning and camaraderie. Notably, the series follows Caitlyn's reflections on her personal transition, involving her need to find privacy from the paparazzi that had been obsessed with her story, as she reconnects with her family. At the same time, she forms a new family with other transgendered and transsexual people in the manner of "families we choose" (Weston 1). As part of choosing her family, Caitlyn presents herself as willing to learn more about less privileged transgender people.

The willingness to learn appears clearly in a sequence where new transgendered friends criticize Caitlyn for her lack of understanding of those who do not possess her cultural, social, and economic capital. On a road trip in San Francisco, for example, Caitlyn meets with her new friends at an LGBT (lesbian, gay bisexual and transgender) center where she comes face to face with transgendered Blossom Brown. Brown discusses having to work in the sex trade in order to gain income while at the same time she encounters rejection when she applied to become a nurse. When Caitlyn responds with an economic solution where she promises to pay for Blossom's nursing training so that she can escape the sex trade, Caitlyn is represented as transformed. This is particularly evident when she reflects on her emerging status as a spokesperson for the transgender community, concerned with issues of social care,

equality, and justice. She represents herself as willing to learn, despite the privileged status that seems to set her apart.

While *There is Something About Miriam*, *Trantasia* and *I am Cait* seem stereotypical and regressive in their insisting on the importance of female glamour, the inherent political themes actually focus on the psychological and social needs of the transgender community. For example, a pivotal sequence in *I am Cait* focuses on the needs of young transgender people in an LGBT Youth center in Los Angeles. When she visits, Caitlyn listens to the problems of transgender youth who grow up without adequate support networks, which often lead many to contemplate suicide. The needs of youth are central to the following case studies where the central storytellers are themselves youths rather than adults. These texts similarly draw attention to social needs, psychological difficulties, and cultural problems, the representations are generally more optimistic and relatively carefree, celebrating the ritual of growing up.

Regular Teens and Surgical Precedents in *Lucy: Teen Transsexual*, *My Transsexual Summer*, and *Transsexual Teen: Beauty Queen*

Lucy: Teen Transsexual, produced by BBC3, tells the story of one of the youngest people desiring to change sex. Aged 17, Lucy (formerly Richard) is waiting till her 18th birthday, the earliest time that she can be considered for gender reassignment. *My Transsexual Summer*, produced by Channel 4, presents the story of a group of mostly transgender youth aged between 22 and 30. This group includes Max, Fox, and Lewis (female-to-male transgender youth); Drew, Donna and Sarah (male-to-female transgender youth); and Karen, a male-to-female-to-male transgender older adult, who is aged 52. *Transsexual Teen: Beauty Queen*,

produced by BBC3, is a more recent text. The central premise concerns the desires of Jackie Green (Figure 5) to win the Miss England beauty contest. She is represented as the youngest person in the world to undergo gender reassignment at aged 16, from male-to-female.

The representation of, or reference to, surgery, features within all the youth documentaries. In *Lucy: Teen Transsexual* the culmination of the documentary considers Lucy's breast augmentation, and *Lucy: Teen Transsexual in Thailand* features her genital reconstruction. Graphic surgery representations are included, revealing how the body is reconstructed with the definition of the scalpel, which offers the main means of transforming an identity. In *Transsexual Teen: Beauty Queen* there is a focus on Jackie achieving larger breast sizes, but there are no actual representations of the body as subject to surgery. Instead, we just see Jackie recovering from surgery in the hospital bed, and there are references to her state of mind and her physical energy. A resistance to representing the youthful body as subject to graphic surgery is also evident in *My Transsexual Summer*, where the only central character represented as going through surgery is Karen, aged 52. Although other cast members discuss the benefits of breast or genital surgery, including Lewis (see Figure 6) who in the series attempts to raise funds for genital surgery, Karen represents an elder role model to demonstrate the benefits of surgery.

The focus on adults as supporters of transgendered youth is particularly evident in the representation of parents and family. In *Lucy: Teen Transsexual*, Lucy's mother encourages family support by bringing together Lucy's sister, aunt, grandmother and grandfather. In a pivotal sequence, Lucy's aunt tells the other female members of the family that, when she initially heard of Richard's desire to become Lucy, she "just wanted to get hold of her and make everything right." Similarly, in *My Transsexual Summer*, Drew's mother offers unconditional support for Drew's gender transition. Drew's mother is represented as an ideal

mother for transitioning youth in general, mostly because she supports Sarah, who gets little respect from her family.

Within *Transsexual Teen: Beauty Queen* offers a similar focus on the support of parents, especially from Jackie's mother. After recalling the surgery costs between £28,000 and £30,000, an interviewer asks Jackie's mother if she would agree to fund the surgery if Jackie would agree to pay her back. "Yeah, right!" Jackie's mother says in an ironic tone, which indicates she knows Jackie would never pay her back, but she does not require this promise to help fund the surgery. For his part, Jackie's father attends the Miss England heats and assures Jackie that he is proud of her.

All the youth documentaries offer positive representations of transgender life chances providing new modes of "intimate citizenship," but, at the same time, their representations of diversity remain problematic. For example, each of these texts involves a key sequence featuring transgendered youth who identify themselves as heterosexual everyday people and distinctly not homosexual. Even though the characters of Donna and Max in *My Transsexual Summer* celebrate the notion of being transgender and potentially desiring to retain their original genitalia, there is a rejection of homosexuality as an identity. While this seems to reject a parity with gay male or lesbian identity politics and could be perceived as "displaced abjection" where one minority contingent turns on another to gain access to power (Stallybrass and White 51), the focus on the life chances of transgender youth seems to represent all constituent members of LGBT identities. This is especially apparent in the explorations of bullying at school for gender and sexual diversity, which often include references to suicide contemplation (Cover 1).

Care and empathy are particularly evident in *Transsexual Teen: Beauty Queen*, where Jackie reports that she first considered herself a girl at the age of four. She explains that she

only dressed as a boy until she eight, when her mother finally began to allow her to dress as a girl. Her remarks are similar to those featured in the documentary *Age 8 and Wanting a Sex Change*. In *Transsexual Teen: Beauty Queen*, Jackie's mother the considers the vulnerability of her child:

Jackie was attacked a couple of times by other kids [in school]. They circled around her, about 20 of them, in the playground shouting out, "Show us your dick! When are you going to get it chopped off?" There was one boy in school who kept calling her "Tranny, tranny, freak, tranny-man-beast," and it was every time that he saw her.

Having difficult experiences in and outside of school, Jackie also reports being beaten up by two forty-year-old men. Before she turned fourteen, Jackie explains, she had seriously contemplated suicide at least six times. In this way, *Transsexual Teen: Beauty Queen* highlights the need to support all LGBT youths in school who may be vulnerable.

Lucy: Teen Transsexual, *My Transsexual Summer*, and *Transsexual Teen: Beauty Queen* all argue on behalf of supporting transgender youth, foregrounding not only the need for support networks that might be enabled by parents and peers, but also showcasing how growing up as transgender involves experiences similar to those of so-called "regular teens." These texts also clearly identify the need to recognise the early stages of gender dysphoria and offer unconditional and non-judgemental support to transgender children from a very early age.

Conclusion

Caitlyn Jenner's appearance on the front cover of *Vanity Fair* signals acceptance and

integration for transgendered people through the mode of “intimate citizenship,” which offers new role models to the world. Regardless of this optimistic setting, however, the production of *I am Cait* makes it clear that transgendered people remain at the periphery of the representational norm where issues of trial and tribulation take precedent over an emphasis on the everyday and the fully integrated. This struggle is particularly evident in the “rhetoric of deception,” which frequently connects transgender individuals to “notions of appearance, reality, and discovery” (Bettcher 47). Besides notions of deception, aspects of authenticity and political goals are also problematic.

On the one hand, the notion of transition is about arrival and the completion of a journey, which suggests fixing a gender or sexual identity that seems inauthentic. On the other hand, the experience of being between genders, for many transgender and transsexual people, suggests fluidity and un-fixedness. Gender roles are either something to claim and use in a binary oriented world where, for example, the female must challenge the hierarchy of the male, or something that remain fluid and provides strength by allowing border crossing and expanding the limits of gender identity. Nagoshi’s and Brzuzy’s ideas on transgender theory are central here. They frame the importance of the intersectional and experiential in traversing the essentialist and social constructionist divide. The transgender/transsexual documentary performances discussed in this essay offer a wider scope through which to view the experiential and the performative.

Aspects such as celebrity, community, domesticity, and realism offer methods within performative documentary for transpeople to foreground the benefits of the “care of the self” and the ability to parody the “deceptive rhetoric.” Youth narratives also work in this manner by focusing on the notion of the regular teen, while also working through the context and/or expectations of surgical procedures. Appearing as both part of society and caring for

themselves and for others, the documentary performers discussed in this essay stimulate new life chances for transgendered people.

These performances directly address the assignation of the deceiver. As Talia Mae Bettcher explains,

We may wonder why transpeople should feel apologetic about “gender deception” in the first place. In a world that constructs us to begin with as either deceivers or pretenders – invariably denying our authenticity and preventing our very existence, surely “gender deception” must be seen as one laudable tactic of attempted survival in what appears to be an exceptionally violent, no-win situation. (60)

The documentary performers discussed in this essay, challenge the stereotypical order by addressing the notion of the no-win situation. Facing up to accusations of deception, the performers in these texts reveal the importance of kinship groups and “families of choice” that nurture confidence in the experiential self. Whether the individual wants to become the normal girl or the normal boy or is happier considered as an extraordinary person in terms of gender or sexuality, contentment seems to be less about achieving an identity, than about finding a network of support that aids one through the transition and offers endurance.

In *My Transsexual Summer*, Drew retorts to verbal abuse from a passer-by on the streets who shouts “Show us your balls!” with the declaration “I’ve probably got bigger balls than you!” Drew’s retort reveals that the best tactics to get by, to face up to, or to challenge oppression is to *own* the pernicious attribution (such as the deceiver) in order to question it, to parody it, and to disperse it.⁷ As Drew reveals, “passing as,” or “being,” an identity is less important than the personal resolve and confidence in self that frames the problem of deception by questioning the notion of dissent. Such energy and strength comes principally

from within the self, yet it is emboldened and enabled by participating in kinship groups, which act, to some degree, as familial and community settings.

There might not be an ideal model of documentary performativity for transpeople that offers a consensus, an agreement, or even a truce, that harmonizes the identity politics inherent in LGBT identity. Despite this, our task should not be to decode the exact meaning of these texts. Rather than embark on a debate that determines, qualifies, and tests an outcome, we must open up conversations that focus on different voices with equality. While there is no agreed consensus, it is the diversity of the tonal range that generates resonance, not necessarily the quality of the harmony and its reference to some pre-existing order.

Notes

¹ I would like to note the contribution of Ann E. Larabee and the peer reviewers used by *The Journal of Popular Culture* whose responses to my earlier drafts offered significant insight that aided the development of this essay.

² Other prominent documentaries include: Kate Davis's film *Southern Comfort* that focuses on a transgender man who has been diagnosed with cancer; Jeremy Simmons's and Thairin Smothers's documentary series *Transgeneration* that follows the lives of four transgender college students and the reality television series *I am Jazz* which focuses on transgender youth in relation to family life and growing up. Also there are diverse ranges of non-western documentaries that focus on transgender and transsexual identity. For example, *Be Like Others* explores transgender identity in Iran. Also India's Hijra transgender community has been featured in a number of documentaries, most recently *Transindia*.

³ Its important to note that there is a dominance of male to female representations, and clearly more attention needs to be afforded to female to male representations, within documentary production and scholarly enquiry. Notably the work of Jack Haberstam is central within this, specifically evident in his forthcoming book *Trans: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*.

⁴ See also: *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism* by Pat Califia, *Transgender Warriors: The Making of History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodham* by Leslie Fienberg and *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* by Gayle Salamon.

⁵ These are those that conform to the dominant binary gendered order.

⁶ Candice Cayne also appears in the documentary series *I am Cait*, seemingly as a close ally and mentor to Caitlyn Jenner.

⁷ For example, the word queer has been used in this way, when in the early 1990s academic and activists reclaimed its meaning. See “Power Grab: Reclaiming Words Can Be Such a Bitch” by Gary Nunn.

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