

Gender Tourism in Feature Films: The Case of *Transamerica* ¹



Various queer theorists have contended that some non-queer (or even “inappropriately” queer) observers who offer cultural commentary or artistic visions about queer subjects do so in pursuit of various heteronormative or cissexist² agendas. Even though such art or commentary may not be intentionally homophobic or transphobic, it conveys pejorative messages nonetheless. Those non-queer voices are held to have failed to recognize various implications of what they are articulating, and to know not whereof they speak in the first place because, in the absence of lived experience of the relevant queer social reality, they are thought to have no appropriate credentials to issue authoritative observations. Such commentary (or art) is the work of observers that these queer theorists might call *gender tourists*.

To my knowledge, no one has actually used this expression, but *gender tourism* does strike me as an accurate label to capture the sensibilities that motivate this body of criticism. Dismissing someone as a gender tourist may sometimes be legitimate, but as with all sustained critical responses to alleged forms of academic or artistic overreach, anti-tourist commentary can become seduced by its own ideological rhetoric, and blind to more nuanced and reflective treatment of gay, lesbian, or transgendered characters and themes undertaken by “straight” artists and scholars—treatments now emerging partly because the cumulative legitimate criticisms of past evidence of gender tourism have made an impact.

The ideological momentum against *any* residual hint of gender insensitivity in contemporary gender-focused art or commentary can provoke intemperate charges of gender tourism.

I contend that *Transamerica* (Duncan Tucker, 2005) illustrates this form of critical excess. *Transamerica* invites the gender tourist charge partly because, in terms of gender politics, its portrayal of transgendered identity is socially conservative, tailored to sit comfortably with heteronormative audiences. Bree Osbourne (Felicity Huffman), the film's central transgendered character, gets portrayed in terms of the "wrong body narrative" associated with the medical profession's pathologizing of trans identity as an aberrant psychological condition (gender identity disorder or, more recently, gender dysphoria) in need of a "cure" (by means of conforming bodily aesthetics to psychologically-grounded gender identity). As many have observed,³ the wrong body account of transgendered identity is designed (perhaps unconsciously) to reinforce the gender binary by insisting that there are only two sexes: anyone who feels ambivalent about their sex/gender identity, as biologically assigned at birth, is either confused (i.e., in need of restorative therapy), or belongs squarely on the other side of the gender divide, and hence needs hormonal and surgical "fixing". The idea of sustaining one or more intermediate categories as stable permanent alternatives is, under the wrong body narrative, unthinkable.

From this perspective, postmodern conceptions of gender as merely performative are not foundationally accurate. While some elements of gender *presentation* may be culturally specific, gender itself is a naturalized concept closely associated with, but not always identical to, biological sex. There are, on the wrong body account, only *two* of these. (Never mind intersexed identities!) Gender dysphoria occurs when gender and biological sex happen to be misaligned. The cure—on *this* account—is to realign the binaries (which are still, and always, binary).

I propose to argue that such criticism, while justified with respect to the film's exclusive reliance on the wrong body metaphor, fails to recognize the extent to which *Transamerica* transcends the gender colonialism of films examining queer identities prior to the emergence of anti-gender tourism literature in the 1970s/80s, when the charge of gender tourism was certainly justified. *Transamerica* deserves more credit than generally conceded, because we tend to lose sight of the distance we have come on questions of gender.

Paradigmatic gender tourists earned the ire of queer critics by portraying queer individuals in ways that were themselves defamatory, or at least myopically insensitive, playing to negative queer stereotypes. One early example: the association between Betty Friedan and the slogan *lavender menace*, during the emergence of second wave feminism as a political movement. In 1969 Friedan attempted to distance the National Organization for Women from lesbian activists, because she regarded lesbians as man-hating social misfits who would incur needless electoral hostility against NOW. This provoked a response from “radical” lesbian feminists who, in effect, disparaged Friedan as a gender tourist.⁴

Another early example, this time in an artistic context, was Vito Russo’s 1981 aphorism: “Mainstream films about homosexuality are not for gays.”⁵ Commercial feature films up through the eighties, in Russo’s view, used gay and lesbian characters as cinematic tropes playing to heterosexist stereotypes, even on those rare occasions where they purported to be sympathetic portrayals of queer life in America.⁶

Later, in the context of scholarship focusing on transgendered identity, we have the example of Sandy Stone’s “The Empire Strikes Back: A Post-Transsexual Manifesto”,⁷ a reply to Janice Raymond’s anti-transsexual screed, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of The She-male*.⁸ Raymond constructed a derisive account of Male to Female (MtoF) transsexuals⁹ in which she impugns both their identity as female (they are really just men in disguise, retaining domineering “masculinist” behavioral traits and sense of privilege), and their alleged motives (to infiltrate and control the women’s movement, and to challenge cultural feminists’ conviction that there is an essentially distinctive female nature). Stone responds to Raymond’s dismissive generalizations by pointing out the degree to which the extant literature on transsexual experience, written up to that point mostly by non-transsexuals, had been engaged in the business of constructing morality tales and origin myths in the service of preserving patriarchal and heteronormative cultural convictions, colonizing and misdescribing lived transsexual experiences to those ends. In a similar vein, Jacob Hale’s “Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans _____”¹⁰ offers thoughtfully prudent advice for non-transsexual scholars who wish to venture into this territory, but also wish to avoid the narrow-minded cultural imperialism of authors like Raymond.

Gender tourism charges came to focus on transgender *film* themes in the

1990s, as part of the New Queer Cinema movement. Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992) was a popular early target, as was Buffalo Bill (Ted Levine) in Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). But times were already changing, thanks in part to those earlier critiques.¹¹ *Transamerica* is a transitional artifact, more predominantly a cultural reflection of those changes than a work of gender tourism.

1. *Transamerica* as Gender Tourism

The “wrong body” model is questioned only once during *Transamerica*, at the outset, when Bree, née Stanley Schupak, has to secure the signature of an unsympathetic psychiatrist in the role of medical gatekeeper, whose approval is required for sex reassignment surgery. In response to his stern admonition that gender dysphoria is “a very serious mental disorder”, Bree asks: “Don’t you find it odd that plastic surgery can cure a mental disorder?” Her response suggests two further (unspoken) questions: why should felt gender identity dictate *anything* about bodily aesthetics? And why should we even classify Bree’s experience of her own gender identity as a mental disorder?¹²

Kate Bornstein’s acknowledgement of the existence of “non-operative transsexuals”¹³ is apposite here. In addition to pre- and post-operative transsexuals, there are people who think of themselves as transgendered without any need (or desire) for genital surgery. Advocates of this view are frequently motivated by the conviction that the binary construction of gender is nothing more than a cultural concoction, best discarded.¹⁴ As transgender theorist Dean Spade observed:

Every person has a modified body, and every person puts on their gender in the morning when they get dressed, and over the long term... So to just take one [transgendered] population, and decide that their body modification is unnatural, or moving away from a naturalized center, is a pretty sexist thing to do. It really mirrors the notion that only women’s sexuality is deviant, or that only queer sexuality is deviant, and nobody else has sexuality; everybody else is normal.¹⁵

Transamerica does not explore this more radical view. Bree only raises the question to parry the doctor’s psychological bullying, not because she really endorses the implicit critique of binary gender thinking. When the doctor asks Bree how she feels about her penis, she declares that: “It disgusts me. I don’t even like looking at it.” Her avowal comes across as sincere, not simply as a case of telling the guardian of gender orthodoxy what he wants to hear in order to secure approval of her surgery.¹⁶ But the latter dynamic *is* also present in the conversation—

the relationship between Bree and the doctor is clearly antagonistic, the doctor depicted as an authoritarian know-it-all and Bree as weary (and wary) of dealing with medical establishment hurdles in her pursuit of gender normalization. This aspect constitutes part of Duncan Tucker's effort to educate mainstream audiences about the hurdles transgendered people face in a hostile society.

Bree herself has no desire to live a life of gender ambiguity with respect to prevailing cultural norms. When explaining herself later to Toby (Kevin Zegers), her newly discovered son with whom she winds up crossing America on a journey of self-discovery, she resorts to the language of gender dysphoria. In discussing her goals with her therapist Margaret (Elizabeth Peña) at the beginning of the film, Bree's focus is entirely on passing as female and, through her impending surgery (the perceived holy grail of her road trip), on *being* female. Her terrors revolve around the prospect of not successfully passing. At one point during the trip she calls Margaret tearfully to report that an eight-year-old (in a restaurant) just read her as male. After her car is stolen, along with her hormones in her purse, she worries about the potential effects on her appearance.

Bree has clearly adopted heteronormative thinking about trans nature. "Good" transsexuals, as Kate Bornstein points out, buy into the standard therapeutic model: self-affirmation is achieved by passing in one's new gender, both before and after surgery, never revealing one's transsexual history or identity. "Transsexuality is the only condition for which the therapy is to lie" (Bornstein, 62), a policy which Bree implements by lying to her own son. These are lies of omission: she fails to inform him of their biological relationship or of her real reason for contacting him—Margaret's insistence that she deal with this newly discovered but unresolved family connection before embarking on her sex reassignment surgery. She acquiesces instead to Toby's own hypothesis, that she is a do-gooder church lady on a mission to save juvenile reprobates. To do otherwise, to correct Toby's mistaken hypothesis and reveal that she is his father, would expose her transgendered identity. The reason for this medical practice, Bornstein argues (125-128), is to reaffirm the gender binary: there are two, and only two, sexes.

From the perspective of more politicized accounts of transgendered identity, the analysis just set forth suggests that Bree is afflicted with false consciousness, embracing an inauthentic false determinism about gender. On this view, heteronormative gender conventions are grounded in a history of cultural accidents rather than anything emergent from fixed human nature. Bree's unqualified

desire to become a woman constitutes a failure of self-recognition. Borrowing terminology from Katrina Roen,¹⁷ Bree should be embracing a postmodernist ‘both/neither’ approach to her own gender identity, as being in some ways both male and female, and in some ways neither gender. Instead, she settles for a more traditional either/or rejection of gender fluidity: she cannot be a man, so she must be a woman.

There is no cinematic meta-narrative in *Transamerica* that interrogates Bree’s assumptions. Instead, Toby’s assumption about Bree’s religious mission becomes a plot device for transforming *Transamerica* into a traditional road movie: Toby is in an NYC lock-up for delinquent behavior; Bree has to get back home to Los Angeles for her surgery, hoping to deposit Toby with a step-parent along the way—one who turns out to be thoroughly unsuitable. Character growth ensues along the road. But such a conventional cinematic framework, coupled with the conservative “wrong body” account of trans identity, encourages critics sensitive to the gender politics of pathologized accounts of transgendered nature to regard *Transamerica* as nothing more than gender tourism through a heteronormative lens.

Transamerica can be read as culturally conservative with respect to gender politics in another important respect: the film’s emphasis on chronicling the trials of Bree’s life in transition. As Stephanie Zacharek observes: “The picture too often feels like a lesson in tolerance, pleading for us to recognize that transsexuals are just like you and me, even as it can’t resist reminding us that they’re not.”¹⁸ The film draws unwarranted connections between trans and queer identity, even though Bree’s new gender persona is quite heteronormative, as attested in her nascent romance with Calvin Many Goats (Graham Greene), a courtly rancher of Navaho extraction who rescues Bree and Toby after Bree’s car is stolen. Nicole Gagné, reviewing *Transamerica*,¹⁹ asks why Duncan Tucker feels compelled to explain Bree with stereotypical queer tropes: “the clichéd parental dyad for producing queers—a controlling mother and an ineffectual father.” She elaborates by commenting on the mechanics of Bree’s frequently inartful efforts to pass in her chosen gender:

More problematic are the opening scenes, where Bree has been made to look as ugly as possible. This lame attempt to extract laughs reduces her to someone trying to be something she is not. In real life, when a trans woman wears bad makeup, she inevitably appears overpainted, with mismatching colors and effects. She doesn't seem aged and cadaverous, which is the Karloff-like effect drawn onto [Felicity] Huffman. Bree may be an insecure tranny, but she isn't blind... Huffman needs no such gimmicks to play a trans woman. (Gagné, 57)

The first of these observations suggests that *Transamerica* adopts a naïvely simplistic conception of the etiology of transgendered identity, conflating it with an equally naïve conception of the etiology of gay identity, thereby explaining Bree's transgendered identity away by recasting her as a confused gay man. The second, the heavy emphasis on the aesthetics of transitioning, layers the film with a voyeuristic "circus geek" quality.

The latter phenomenon occurs also in Frank Pierson's direction of Lee Pace's performance in *Soldier's Girl* (2003 Showtime). Where Duncan Tucker might reasonably argue that transitioning is a major part of the *Transamerica* narrative, Pierson has no such excuse. Calpernia Addams, the real-life model for Lee Pace's on-screen trans woman, and a model of feminine beauty by western cultural standards, was already working as a professional showgirl when she first met Private Barry Winchell (Troy Garrity). (For readers unfamiliar with Addams, she appears in *Transamerica* as the fiddle player at a suburban Dallas house party featuring transgendered guests and host, which Bree and Toby attend during their travels.) Transitioning just wasn't relevant to the tragic events which lead to Winchell's murder by fellow soldier Calvin Glover in 1999, a homophobically violent outburst against Addams' and Winchell's arguably heterosexual romance. Yet Pierson feels compelled to include the transition element, as he acknowledges in his DVD commentary, making observations about the extent to which Pace's make-up was deliberately harsh during the early showgirl scenes, giving way to a more convincingly feminine look as the romance progressed through the film.

Why do film directors indulge themselves in such tropes, emphasizing the artificiality of gendered identity for transgendered individuals in particular? One fairly natural reading is to conclude that such cinematic *obsessions* are the product of gender tourism. As Jacob Hale put it, addressing cisgendered scholars writing about transgendered identity:

Interrogate your own subject position: ...what your interests and stakes are in what you see and say as you continue your work. (Here's what Bernie Hausman says about how her initial interest was formed: She had been reading about transvestism and ran across library material on transsexualism. "Now *that* was fascinating." Why? "The possibilities for understanding the construction of 'gender' through an analysis of transsexualism seemed enormous and there wasn't a lot of critical material out there." Remember that using those with less power within institutionalized, material and discursive structures as your meal ticket (retention, tenure, promotion) is objectionable to those so used.)²⁰

Are Tucker, Pierson, and other similarly-situated commercial film directors simply using their own unreflective images of transgendered subjects as cinematic meal tickets, trading on popular "fascination with the exotic" (Hale again) in a new genre of exploitation films?

2. *Transamerica* as a Study in Inauthenticity: The *Pathetic* Transsexual

Julia Serano, in *Whipping Girl*, reads such films in this unequivocal manner, as part of a broader analysis of media treatment of trans topics:

Media depictions of trans women...fall under two main archetypes: the "deceptive transsexual" or the "pathetic transsexual." While characters based on both models are presented as having a vested interest in achieving an ultra-feminine appearance, they differ in their abilities to pull it off... In contrast to the "deceivers," who wield their feminine wiles with success, the "pathetic transsexual" characters aren't deluding anyone. Despite her masculine mannerisms and five o'clock shadow, the "pathetic" transsexual will insist that she is a woman trapped inside a man's body. The intense contradiction between the "pathetic" character's gender identity and her physical appearance is often played for laughs. (Serano 36, 38)

Serano's classification scheme is striking in the breadth of its application.²¹ She contends that virtually all transgendered *female*²² characters in commercial feature films can be classified as either deceptive or pathetic. Both types "are designed to validate the popular assumption that trans women are truly men." (Serano 40) Deceptive transsexuals are depicted as *dangerous* fakes, "retaliating against men, often by seducing them, ...[in] an unconscious acknowledgment that both male and heterosexual privilege is threatened by transsexuals." (Serano 38) But they are fakes nonetheless: "while the 'deceiver' is initially perceived to be a 'real' female, she is eventually revealed as a wolf in sheep's clothing—an illusion that is the product of lies and modern medical technology—and she is usually punished accordingly."²³

On the comedic side, the home genre for most pathetic transsexuals, we find (mostly) *harmless* fakes. Huffman's Bree is, on Serano's view, deliberately portrayed as an implausible woman, ultimately no different from Jack Lemmon's and Tony Curtis's comic portrayals of Daphne and Josephine in Billy Wilder's 1959 cross-dressing screwball comedy, *Some Like It Hot*. That is the point, in particular, of Bree's bad make-up efforts:

captur[ing] trans women *in the act* of putting on lipstick, dresses, and high heels,...[gives] the audience the impression [once again] that the trans woman's femaleness is an artificial mask or costume,...thus neutraliz[ing] the potential threat that trans femininities pose to the category of 'woman' by playing to the audience's subconscious belief that femininity itself is artificial." (Serano 41, 43)

Serano acknowledges the cognitive dissonance in this statement. (What does the artificiality of *trans* femininity say about the femininity of those who are *biologically* female?) But she simply notes that the dissonance is also part of our collective cultural baggage: "while most people assume that women are naturally feminine, they also (rather hypocritically) require them to spend an hour or two each day putting on their faces and getting all dressed up in order to meet societal standards for femininity." (Serano 43)

At least one writer, Gary Needham, suggests that the opposite lesson is to be drawn here:

Transamerica is a queer text because it destabilizes what is understood in the broadest sense to be normative through its transsexual main character. *Transamerica* exposes normative assumptions about gender... [by] reveal[ing] just how much "work" goes into the construction of femininity. Importantly, it reveals femininity as a cultural rather than natural construct, something that is imitative and can be molded by performance and shaped by surgery.²⁴

In other words, the artificiality of Bree's gender is synecdochal for all forms of gender identity; gender, no matter whose gender, is *always* a local cultural construct. Where Serano points out the singular focus of the film on *Bree's* gender identity, differentiating her from cisgendered people, Needham sees a metaphor for the artificiality of gender identities, generally.

To make the leap to Needham's broader inference, however, *Transamerica* offers no help to audiences already attached to naturalized binary gender perspectives. Bree is the *only* character in the film for whom gender is explicitly treated as a performative construct. On Serano's reading, the point of the pathetic transsexual trope is to reassure straight audiences that trans outliers to binary

sexuality are neurotics living out biological fictions. We are not intended to take the phenomenon of transsexuality seriously in any comedic or tragicomic films featuring transgendered characters, because such films are actually designed to reinforce conventional cultural attitudes about the intractability of the putative link between birth sex and gender. Anyone born a man can never be, in Bree's words to Toby, anything but an "ersatz woman."

3. *Transamerica* as a Study in Authenticity: The not-so-pathetic Transsexual

The problem with Serano's blanket condemnation of such films is that there is no room for nuance. Tom Wilkinson's non-comic role as the awkwardly masculine Ruth Applewood, facing the challenge of transitioning in a very gender normative environment in *Normal* (Jane Anderson, 2003 HBO) may never come across as plausibly feminine. But Peter Outerbridge's square-jawed big-boned Judy in the Canadian romantic comedy *Better Than Chocolate* (Anne Wheeler, 1999), and Felicity Huffman's Bree certainly do, at least some of the time.

Even Wilkinson's Ruth, as awkward an MtoF transgendered character as ever devised for the screen, possesses a committed dignity that commands viewer respect. Wilkinson's age and familiar screen presence age preclude any aspiration to hyperfeminine beauty. He aims instead for what is achievable for Ruth: a dowdy AARP rural Midwestern form of femininity. The fact that even this project is not completely convincing during the course of the film is not intended to persuade viewers that such an achievement is impossible. It simply illustrates how difficult transitioning can be for anyone uninitiated to performative standards for a gender in which one has not been groomed since childhood.

There is in these more recent films an element of critical self-awareness that was absent from conventional cross-dressing comedies. Bree's "ersatz women" crack in *Transamerica*, for example, directed against the MtoF transsexual characters at the Dallas house party mentioned earlier, is intended not as a reaffirmation of audience prejudices, but as a symptom of Bree's intellectual hypocrisy and ambivalence about her own gender identity, something she has yet to overcome. She says this because she is fearful of Toby's censure, a fear grounded in her own suspicion that societal transphobia isn't entirely invalid, that she bears deserved stigma for mental illness with a vaguely illicit remedy.

Her fears with respect to Toby are entirely self-generated. As a social misfit himself, Toby is more tolerant of outsiders than Bree's innate gender conservatism

will yet permit her to be. Indeed, Duncan Tucker is eliciting audience sympathy for the opposite view: the house party participants, with the exception of trans man David Harrison, are all real women, both as characters and (with one exception) as actors too: women who, both in the film and in real life, happen to have transgendered histories. It's Bree who hasn't quite arrived there yet, exhibiting her own confusion in an ironic moment by suggesting that "the lady in pink" (Lynn Laurino) is sadly incapable of passing. Mary Ellen (Bianca Leigh), Bree's host for the overnight stay in Dallas, corrects her with the information that Laurino's character is a GG—a genuine girl²⁵—in attendance to sell Mary Kay cosmetics to these suburban women. This revelation is, of course, doubly ironic, in reflecting the extent to which trans women are indistinguishable from biological women. For both groups, May Kay products and application techniques are equally relevant to the challenge of developing and refining one's gender presentation skills.

Tucker contends (DVD commentary) that he included this scene in order to demonstrate the extent to which gender transformation *could* be complete: "These are all trans people... I wanted this scene in so badly to show that there could be real trans presence in the movie, to show that Felicity, as gorgeous a woman as she is, as Bree, ...is not the femm-iest woman...in this room. There are women who are trans who are smaller than she and are higher-voiced than she."

This defense reveals that a different kind of unreflective myopia still afflicts Tucker's conception of what it is to be a complete woman. As Serano points out, the pathetic transsexual subgenre assumes that "the trans woman wants to achieve a stereotypically feminine appearance and gender role. The possibility that trans women are even capable of making a distinction between identifying as female and wanting to cultivate a hyperfeminine image is never raised." (Serano, 41) This is the presumptive standard to which Tucker is referring above, effectively confirming Serano's criticism in his own screenwriting and direction.

Transamerica is not one-dimensional, however. Tucker is also interested in conveying an evolution in Bree's sense of her own gender identity over time. When the film opens, the focus is very much on the mechanics of passing. Tucker informs us (DVD Commentary) that "poor Bree isn't very used to putting on make-up. She probably learned from reading a few books and going on the Internet. She's using the wrong shade of foundation, because she doesn't go to stores to buy it. She buys it, again on-line, because she's embarrassed." But toward the end of the commentary he observes that Bree has been transformed into a more

self-possessed and confidently female figure. His aim, in short, is not to make Bree implausibly female, but transitionally female. This is, after all, precisely the situation of Bree's character.

Thinking back to the parallel treatment of Lee Pace's evolving femininity in his performance as Calpernia Addams in *Soldier's Girl*, it is important for critics to bear in mind the intended audience. In both films, emphasis on the mechanics of effective gender performance was not intended to subvert the validity of gender transformation, but reflected the directors' convictions that visual cues were needed to convey other more profound messages to mainstream audiences.

In the case of *Soldier's Girl*, the cognitive dissonance between the homophobic hostility at Winchell's military base and the off-base *heterosexual* romance between Addams and Winchell would evade mainstream audiences if they were allowed to simply forget that Addams was transgendered. The point of the visual reminders was to provoke audiences accustomed to binary gender thinking to begin asking themselves: just what counts as a heterosexual or homosexual relationship, anyway? There was therefore a perfectly legitimate reason for Pierson's decision to portray Lee Pace's gender presentation with some fluidity over the course of the film, as a mechanism for challenging straight audiences to reflect more deeply about our culturally rigid classifications of romantic relationships, shoe-horning non-standard relationships into standardized categories to which they don't belong. (Addams reports, for example, about the extent to which the mainstream press cataloged her relationship with Winchell as a "gay relationship", identifying her as Winchell's "gay male lover".²⁶) The result is a compelling film.

Similarly, the focus on the mechanics of Bree's gender transformation in *Transamerica* serve, at the very least, to introduce mainstream audiences to the social challenges of being transgendered in a hostile culture. Transition stories are natural vehicles for exposing cultural gender insensitivities to public examination. Queer audiences may find such tales tediously "dated", but they are not the intended audience. The point of such transition narratives is not to reaffirm existing prejudices about the impossibility of counting trans women as real women, and trans men as real men. Just the opposite: the point is to convince audiences that such transformations are indeed possible.

How then, does *Transamerica* persuade its audience that Bree is a genuine woman? There is no attempt to radically transform the gender perspective of viewers by the end of the film. Bree's gender evolution is achieved within the

culturally conservative framework described above. Bree does indeed undergo sex reassignment surgery—the gold standard for legitimating her new gender under the heteronormatively pathologized account of transsexual identity. But Bree also becomes more emotionally authentic toward the end of the film. This is displayed first in her affectionate interaction with Calvin Many Goats. Later, Bree’s emotional honesty surfaces again when she confesses to Toby her true relationship to him—even though her honesty is coerced by Toby’s attempt to seduce her. Still later, her grief at having lost Toby through her own mendacities brims over, during an intimate moment with Margaret, her therapist, while in post-surgery convalescence. And finally, during her reunion with Toby at the film’s close, we see a conventional mother/son relationship emerging, Bree scolding Toby for parking his feet on her new coffee table.

Transamerica’s resolution is simplistic when contrasted with the range of transgendered identities which people can and do now occupy. The conviction that Bree gets to count fully as a woman only when she trades in her penis for a vagina is especially restrictive, both as a definition of gender identity, and because it involves expense that not all can afford, plus surgery reliable only for trans women, not for trans men (unsatisfactory penis construction technology). Linking gender identity specifically to genitalia is therefore reactionary, because it’s deferential to the view that, in the end, genitalia really *do* determine gender, and classist, because of the economic barriers. It is an unfortunate feature of *Transamerica* that the film accepts this thesis without any counter-narrative.

Still, Bree comes across as an authentic woman, ultimately, because of her psychological evolution rather than her physical modifications. Her nascent romance with Calvin Many Goats is particularly persuasive in this regard. Evidence of Calvin’s tolerance, open-mindedness, and reflective nature, especially in response to Toby’s veiled hints that things are not as they seem with Bree, bodes well for Bree’s prospects for future intimacy with another. The transgendered other’s destiny may not require journeying through life alone.

4. The Charge of Gender Tourism Revisited

Given *Transamerica*’s conservative account of what’s involved in Bree’s legitimately assuming a trans identity, is the charge of gender tourism, in the specific form devised by Julia Serano, justified? Despite the film’s emphasis on the artificial aspects of her gender presentation, Bree is certainly not depicted as a fake woman. Psychologically conflicted in some ways, yes, but her conviction

about her own gender identity is genuine, and a view which the film endorses. The one exception, her “ersatz women” remark, can be explained partly as a reflection of her fears about Toby’s potential reaction to her own transgendered identity (of which he is not yet aware), and partly as her own neurotic internalization of social animus toward trans folk.

The problem with this film, from the perspective of new queer cinema critics and transgender rights theorists, is that its portrayal of transgendered identity is so unrelentingly heteronormative. Bree is the cinematic poster child for Bornstein’s “good transsexual”. Bree acknowledges that she wants to “live stealth” as a heteronormative woman—a very problematic expression which can be read as assuming an identity under false pretenses, but also, somewhat less contentiously, as living without a past, or with an invented cisgendered past. It’s the latter version to which the good transsexual is supposed to aspire. Bree’s neurotic proclivities, her tendencies toward self-loathing born of her internalization of prevailing but destructive cultural gender norms, lends credibility to the thesis that gender dysphoria is a kind of mental illness, but also one for which she is more to be pitied than censured—the misfortune of being “born in the wrong body.”

In short, the film offers no hint that there are other ways of conceiving transgendered identity. A contrasting portrayal can be found in Leslie Feinberg’s depiction of Jess Goldberg, his protagonist in the novel *Stone Butch Blues*.²⁷ Jess undergoes a very different personal odyssey. She first comes out as a butch teenager in the mid-sixties working-class lesbian bar scene in Niagara and Buffalo, New York, a world in which, in queer mimicry of heteronormative relationships, sustains clear dividing lines between butches and femme lesbians, with the socially enforced expectation that butches and femmes pair up only with each other.²⁸

The authenticity of gender identity is visceral in this novel. Femmes and Saturday night butches (women who present as butch for the week-end bar scene, but who pass in femme guise during the work week) run serious physical risks by frequenting the bars, owing to periodic brutal raids by police or homophobic civilian gangs. The stone butches, who present full time in male attire, grooming, occupying male-dominated blue color factory and truck driving jobs, run those risks full time. Many of the novel’s stone butches repeat the conviction that “the life” was not really a choice for them, suggesting that their butch identities were critical to their authenticity.

Jess eventually moves past this division, and starts taking male hormones.

She does so initially not because she believes herself to be transgendered,²⁹ but because she was weary of the social pressures, the hostility, associated with living as a butch woman: “I don’t feel like a man trapped in a woman’s body. I just feel trapped.” (Feinberg, 158-59) Trans activist and performance artist Imani Henry has expressed a similar view:

Part of the reason my show *B4T* is a tribute to butchness, is because that was the hardest period of my life, to live gender variant... When I shaved off my head and there was this ambiguousness of me. That’s when it was like, whoa, I don’t fit neatly into this box and people want to let me know about it, every day, every minute. It was really intense. I have much respect for androgynous, gender-queer trans folks, people who are living without clear social cues like facial hair or lipstick. (*Boy I Am*)

Jess’s old social circle admire what they regard as courageous authenticity in her decision to become more holistically butch. Many years later Frankie, a friend from the Buffalo bar scene era, informs her: “You were like a fucking legend when you started to pass.” (Feinberg, 274) Jess remains ambivalent about the hormones however, eventually ceasing her injections and transitioning part way back, because she comes to regard her new bodily aesthetic as yet another disguise: “As much as I loved my beard as part of my body, I felt trapped behind it. What I saw reflected in the mirror was not a man, but I couldn’t recognize the he/she. My face no longer revealed the contrasts of my gender...I could no longer see the more complicated me beneath my surface.” (Feinberg, 222) Her breast reduction surgery was another matter: regarded as “a gift to herself” to eliminate an unwanted feature of her anatomy, “a coming home to my body” (Feinberg, 175, 224)— suggesting more gender ambiguity here than is initially apparent. Jess thus winds up in the androgynous, gender-queer space for which Imani Henry expressed such admiration: “Who was I now—woman or man? That question could never be answered as long as those were the only choices.” (Feinberg, 222)

Bree is an unlikely candidate to go through such an odyssey of self-discovery. She self-identifies as feminine. Jess is much more of a mixture from the outset. Then, too, Bree is cautious by nature, and almost asexual, her one previous sexual encounter being Stanley’s youthful indiscretion that produced Toby, of which Bree reports: “the whole thing was so tragically lesbian I didn’t think it counted.” Jess, on the other hand, is a risk-taker, and a strongly sexual being, prepared to challenge social conventions for the sake of navigating the intricacies of her/his own feelings. It is no surprise that Bree would respond to her challenges quite differently from Jess. Not everyone has to be publically political in order to be

authentic in their expression of their identity and their social values. On the other hand, in negotiating our own identities, we all have to deal with externally imposed social constructions as we find them. For they are going to influence the public effects of our behavior, whether we welcome them or not, as others translate our behavior through those shared constructions.

Feinberg's Saturday night butches are illustrative. Were they less authentic, because they were at least somewhat selective about their exposure, even though they too ran serious risks? The stone butches clearly thought of them as posers, but the lives of the Saturday night butches were not explored in Feinberg's narrative. What if, in the heavily gender-segregated working world of this time period, Saturday night butches felt completely out of place doing the kind of hard physical labor which the stone butches welcomed as an important component of their identities? They still had to earn a living. Or as femme-attracted lesbians, did the Saturday night butches adopt masculine personas to which they felt no particular attachment because such action was necessary for successful courtship performance in the rigidly gendered social structure of the lesbian bar scene? So interpreted, their actions were pragmatic rather than inauthentic. Authenticity is a constant negotiation between one's self-conception and the conventional mores of social expectations.

Gender authenticity for Bree is not going to resemble gender authenticity for Jess. For Bree, authenticity demands coming to terms with her feminine identity. This is challenge enough, scary enough. Not every trans-identified person has to wind up where Jess does in order to live authentically. Ironically, Julia Serano, who condemns *Transamerica* as dismissive of trans identity, has put this point as well as anybody:

The fact that at least two overlapping classes of people—those with exceptional gender expressions and those with exceptional subconscious sexes—have been subsumed by the category “transgender” has created a lot of unnecessary tension and confusion. The result is that at least two different (and largely incompatible) views of gender have gained hold in [the transgender movement]. The first one...can be summed up by the popular phrase “sex is in the body, and gender is in the mind.” ...[This view] inadvertently privileges subconscious sex over gender expression... People who espouse this view often look down on those people who identify outside of the male/female binary...

A different view is held by those transgender people who insist that gender itself is entirely constructed...[which] also oversimplifies the concept of gender” by dismissing the possibility that there are any intrinsic inclinations, such as subconscious sex and gender expression... From this “bi-sexist” perspective, people who identify exclusively as either female or male...are assumed to have developed such preferences as the result of being duped by binary gender norms and socialization. (Serano 109-110)

While it is tempting to read *Transamerica* as guilty of the former error, especially because the “gender tourist” who conceived this film appears to be unaware of the alternative view, it does not have to be so read. No judgment about the social constructionist approach to gender is offered. *Transamerica* is neutral on that score. And while *Transamerica* does privilege the pathological account of trans identity, simply by depicting it exclusively, the depiction is at least a sympathetic one. That is surely worth something in an ignorantly hostile cultural environment. We should be careful about precipitous dismissals of gender tourism. Not all such explorations are pernicious.

Richard Nunan

Notes

- 1 My thanks to an anonymous *Film and Philosophy* referee for very detailed and helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and to Dan Shaw for additional editorial improvements.
- 2 *Cissexism* is the belief that transsexuals’ identified genders are inferior to, or less authentic than, those of *cissexuals* (people whose gender identity has always conformed to the bodily sexual identity with which they were born). See Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Emeryville, CA; Seal Press: 2006), 12-15, 23-34.
- 3 Sandy Stone and Kate Bornstein (cited below) were among the earliest such commentators. See also Riki Anne Wilchins, *Read My Lips: Sexual Subversion and the End of Gender* (Milford, CT: Firebrand Press, 1997), 115-123. For more recent examples, see Katrina Roen, “‘Either/Or’ and ‘Both/Neither’: Discursive Tensions in Transgender Politics,” *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society* 27, No. 2 (Winter, 2002), 501-522; and Dean Spade, “Documenting Gender,” *59 Hastings Law Journal* 59 (2008), 731-841.
- 4 “The supersensitivity of the movement to the lesbian issue, and the existence of a few militant lesbians within the movement, once prompted Friedan herself to grouse about ‘the lavender menace’ that was threatening to warp the image of women’s rights. A lavender *herring* perhaps, but surely no clear and present danger.” [Susan Brownmiller, “Sisterhood is Powerful: A Member of the Women’s Liberation Movement Explains What It’s All About,” *New York Times Magazine* (03/15/1970), 140.]
“As long as the label “dyke” can be used to frighten women into a less militant stand, keep her separate from her sisters, keep her from giving primacy to anything other than men and family—then to that extent she is controlled by the male culture... As long as male acceptability is primary—both to individual women and to the movement as a whole—the term *lesbian* will be used effectively against women. Insofar as women want only more privileges within the system, they do not want to antagonize male power. They instead seek acceptability for women’s liberation, and the most crucial aspect of the acceptability is to deny lesbianism—i.e.,

- to deny any fundamental challenge to the basis of the female.” [*The Woman-Identified Woman*, a manifesto issued by the *Radicalesbians* at the Second Congress to Unite Women (May, 1970) when, attired in ‘Lavender Menace’ t-shirts as a form of political theater, they protested being ignored by NOW.]
- 5 Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981, 1987), 325.
 - 6 Shirley MacLaine’s guilt-tormented lesbian in William Wyler’s *The Children’s Hour* (1961), and several equally tormented gay characters in William Friedkin’s *The Boys in the Band* (1970) are often counted as classic examples in the latter category.
 - 7 Kristina Straub and Julia Epstein (eds.), *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Sexual Ambiguity* (New York: Routledge 1991), 280-304.
 - 8 Teacher’s College Press, 1979.
 - 9 MtoF transsexuals are male-bodied individuals (born with male genitalia) who transition (in varying degrees) to female-bodied identities. The reverse case, female-bodied individuals who transition to male sex/gender, receive almost no attention from Raymond, presumably because their actions don’t fit neatly into her political analysis.
 - 10 First published on Sandy Stone’s website in 1997; updated on multiple occasions since: <http://sandystone.com/hale.rules.html>.
 - 11 While gender tourism criticism of *Silence of the Lambs* may be deserved (although Buffalo Bill really isn’t a generalizable character), such criticism is misguided in *The Crying Game*. See my “What is the *Transgender Gaze*? Identity Politics and Transgender Ambivalence at the Movies,” forthcoming.
 - 12 The current *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)*, 1994, revised 2000), the American Psychiatric Association’s classificatory bible for mental illnesses, characterizes gender identity disorder as a mental illness. But *DSM-V* (due out in 2013), following the DSM’s earlier path with respect to declassifying homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1973, will replace that term with *gender dysphoria*, implying a temporary mental state, not a comprehensive mental disorder. There is an ongoing debate about the wisdom of this move, not because trans identity *should* be regarded as a mental disorder, but because, in the still significantly transphobic U.S. legal climate, that classification has some practical advantages under state and federal disability laws.
 - 13 Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 121.
 - 14 For an insightful introduction to pitfalls of both ‘trapped in wrong body’ and ‘beyond the binary’ approaches, see Talia Mae Bettcher, “Without a Net: Starting Point for Trans Stories,” *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues* 10, No. 2 (Spring, 2011), 2-5.
 - 15 *Boy I Am* (Documentary; Sam Feder & Julie Hollar, 2006).
 - 16 This is the occasion for Bree’s grimace in the screen shot initiating this article.
 - 17 “‘Either/Or’...” See also Peter Caster & Allison Andrew, “Transgender Nation: Crossing Borders and Queering Space in *Transamerica*,” *English Language Notes* 45, No. 2 (Fall/Winter, 2007), 133-139; and Sharon Cowan, “‘We Walk Among You’: Trans Identity Politics Goes to the Movies,” *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 21, No. 1 (2009), 91-117. Both discuss *Transamerica* using Roen’s terminology.
 - 18 “*Transamerica*,” *Salon.com* (Dec. 2, 2005).
 - 19 *Cineaste* 31, No. 3 (Summer, 2006), 56-57, at 56.
 - 20 “Suggested Rules...” The internal reference is to Bernice L. Hausman, *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).
 - 21 John Phillips, writing simultaneously and independently of Serano, takes a similar view in *Transgender on Screen* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006). See in particular Chapter 3, “Cross-dressing in Film Comedy,” 51-81.
 - 22 FtoM cinematic characters are almost always “Shakespearean” crossdressers, heterosexual women dressing temporarily as men for the sake of plot exigencies (e.g., Katherine Hepburn in *Sylvia Scarlett* [1935], Barbara Streisand in *Yentl* [1983], Amanda Bynes in *She’s the Man*

- (2006]). The rare exceptions are sartorially coded for lesbian or bisexual inclinations (Marlene Dietrich in *Morocco* [1930], Hertha Thiele in *Mädchen in Uniform* [1931], Greta Garbo in *Queen Christina* [1933]). Neither are intended to be understood as trans characters.
- 23 Serano 40-41. I discuss the 'deceptive transsexual' classification in "What is the *Transgender Gaze*? Identity Politics and Transgender Ambivalence at the Movies," forthcoming.
- 24 "*Transamerica*: The Road to the Multiplex after New Queer Cinema," in Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer (eds.), *Feminism at the Movies* (New York & London: Routledge, 2011), 51-64, at 54, 57-58.
- 25 Of course this slang expression carries its own negative connotation: that the other participants in Mary Ellen's house party are *not* genuinely female. But Mary Ellen is clearly using the expression ironically, conveying biological sexual identity only.
- 26 "Soldier's Girl—The Reality": <http://www.calpernia.com/aboutme/soldiers-girl/>.
- 27 Ann Arbor, MI: Firebrand Books, 1993; Alyson Books, 2003.
- 28 This was indeed the reality in the working-class lesbian bar scene in Buffalo. See Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy & Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993; Penguin, 1994).
- 29 "I'd still be a butch," I protested. "Even on hormones." (Feinberg, 151)