

# FEMINIST VISIONS

## DIVERSIFYING AND COMPLICATING REPRESENTATIONS OF TRANS LIVES: FIVE DOCUMENTARIES ABOUT GENDER IDENTITY

by Joelle Ruby Ryan

**AGAINST A TRANS NARRATIVE.** 61 mins. 2009. Directed by Jules Rosskam; distributed by Video Data Bank (<http://www.vdb.org/order/order.html>). DVD. For price quotes for preview, rental, or purchase, contact Video Data Bank, c/o SAIC, 112 S. Michigan Ave., 3rd Floor, Chicago, IL 60603; phone: (312) 345-3550; fax: (312) 541-8073; email: [info@vdb.org](mailto:info@vdb.org).

**DIAGNOSING DIFFERENCE.** 64 mins. 2009. Directed by Annalise Ophelian. San Francisco: Floating Ophelia Productions. DVD. Purchase: schools & educational institutions, \$295.00; nonprofit agencies & direct client service providers, \$75.00; individuals, \$25.00; special low-cost offers and scholarships possible. Order at <http://www.diagnosingdifference.com/how-to-purchase.html>

**STILL BLACK: A PORTRAIT OF BLACK TRANSMEN.** 77 mins. 2008. Directed by Kortney Ryan Ziegler; produced by Awilda Rodriguez Lora; distributed by Black Star Media, 1545 Jackson St., #109, Oakland, CA 94612 (<http://stillblackfilm.org/>). DVD. Purchase: personal use only, \$25.00; schools, colleges, & universities, \$300.00, or \$500.00 including public performance rights for one screening; community organizations, \$90.00, or \$150.00 including public performance rights for one screening.

**SWITCH: A COMMUNITY IN TRANSITION.** 52 mins. 2009. Directed by Brooks Nelson; produced by Boxxo Productions, PO Box 14162, Portland, OR 97293 (<http://www.boxxo.org/index.html>). Contact producer for distribution information.

**TWO SPIRITS: SEXUALITY, GENDER, AND THE MURDER OF FRED MARTINEZ.** 60 mins. 2009. Directed by Lydia Nibley; produced by Say Yes Quickly Productions, Los Angeles (<http://www.twospirits.org/index.html>). For notification of screenings and DVD availability for purchase, join mailing list via website.

For nearly twenty years now, I have been studying media representations of transgender and transsexual people in film and television. With few exceptions, these depictions have been filled with stereotypes, distortions, biases, and inaccuracies. The media, while not solely or even primarily responsible for cultural and systemic transphobia, is an institution that plays a serious role in the perpetuation of prejudice and discrimination against gender-variant people. I have never been swayed by the argument put forth by some that film and TV are “just en-

tertainment” and thus not to be taken as seriously as or given the rigorous critical treatment shown to other cultural texts, such as literary novels. Popular culture can give us an important window into dominant understandings of social phenomena such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Shows such as *Jerry Springer*, which has been on the air in the U.S. for nearly twenty years, function as cultural barometers that show how hegemonic constructions of identity are disseminated to the detriment of socially marginalized groups. Transgender people, for instance, are cast as hypersexual, dupli-

cious “freaks” who deserve all of the social condemnation hurled at them by a hostile society. This negative perception is repeated in a wide variety of media genres, including documentary.

Traditionally, documentary films that center on transgender experience have often reproduced ways of looking at gender-variance that are sexist and patriarchal. Gender-normative identity is the standard by which all other expressions of gender are judged. This way of looking fosters a view of transgenderism that is exploitative; trans identities are otherized, exoticized, fetishized, and cast as deviant, bizarre,

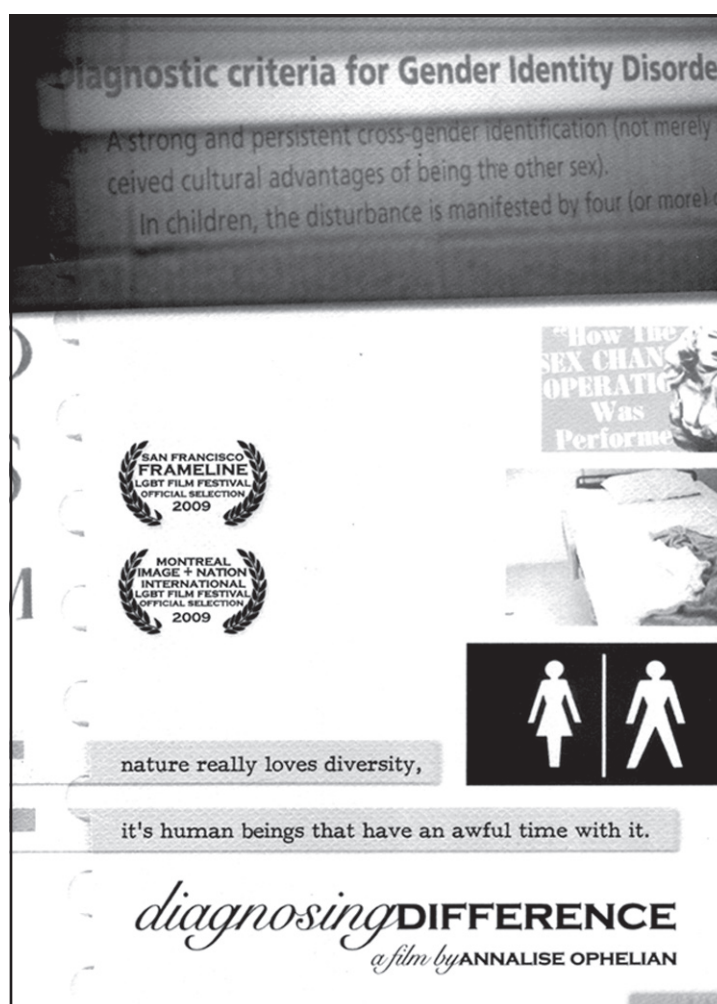
and pathological. The medical model of transsexuality, in which the goal is for trans people to pass as quickly and completely as possible from one gender group to the “opposite,” is frequently referenced in pseudo-scientific television documentaries on the subject. In this way, binary conceptualizations of sex and gender are upheld, as is the supposed superiority of heterosexuality and rigid conformity to gender norms and expectations put forth by the patriarchy. This mode of representation helps to contain gender-variance to the unfortunate experiences of a fringe, socially marginal, minority population, rather than to promote understandings of gender identity and expression that illuminate the ways in which *all* people are policed by oppressive social norms. These images also present transsexual people as tragic victims, devoid of agency, who are “trapped in the wrong body” because nature played a cruel trick on them. These modes of representation seldom inspire empathy and identification; instead, they encourage objectification and, at best, pity.

The feminist, queer, trans, genderqueer, and intersex movements for social justice, equality, and liberation have helped to radically interrogate traditional explications of sex, gender and sexuality in American culture. With extensive academic, artistic, and activist contributions, these movements have pushed the envelope in our understandings of these vexed and contentious social issues. In recent years, I have been incredibly impressed with what I call a “new wave” of trans documentaries that resist stale and essentializing portraits of gender-diverse individuals and communities. For starters, these films eschew the obsession with etiology and causation and take trans lives as a reality that does not need explanation or rationalization. In addition, while medical issues and transition may be included for

discussion, they are not the be-all and end-all of the narrative. Traditional documentaries purporting to be about trans people place entirely too much emphasis on hormones, surgeries, and genitals. In addition, there is often a leering fascination with trans people’s sexuality that is sensationalistic and tabloid-esque. In my dissertation, *Reel Gender*,<sup>1</sup> I argue that there has been an interest in transgender people’s individual physical bodies and medical transitions, with a concomitant *lack* of attention paid to macro-level institutions, transgender agency, trans political activism, and material conditions of gender oppression. In addition, the majority of trans people profiled in the past have been white, professional, and

middle-class. Trans people of color and poor and working-class trans people have been rendered all but invisible. In addition, gender-variant people under the trans umbrella who are not transsexual or who do not conform to the binary gender system have either been left out of the discussion or treated as aberrations.

The documentaries reviewed here accept trans and gender-variant people on their own terms. They place their subjects within a societal, economic, and cultural framework and give agency to the subjects, even with the understanding that this agency is al-



ways already constrained by hegemonic cultural forces. They contest the dominant medical framework associated with traditional transsexualism as the only or primary paradigm for understanding gender diversity. They profile the experiences of people of color and economically challenged folks and refuse to let these voices be shut out by the dominant LGBT rights movement. Perhaps most important, they invite viewers to identify with trans people in ways that hitherto have not been represented. They also encourage all viewers to critically reflect on their own history as gendered subjects, and they make clear the dire need for social change.

One of the dominant models for understanding trans people is based on pathology. The smart new documentary *Diagnosing Difference* performs a full-frontal assault on the idea that transgender people are diseased, disordered, and mentally ill. The film cleverly begins with a reading of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual's (DSM) official Gender Identity Disorder (GID) diagnosis<sup>2</sup> by many of the film's interviewees. Interspersed with the reading of this "scriptural text" are irreverent comments and critiques. This sets the stage for interviews with a diverse group of transgender and transsexual activists, scholars, performers, diversity trainers, and health care providers. The film provides a great thumbnail history of how transgender identity has been "managed" by the mental health industry, and includes excellent commentary by transgender scholar Susan Stryker.

Harry Benjamin was a pioneer in working with transsexual clients beginning in the middle of the twentieth century. He helped develop the "Standards of Care" (SOC)<sup>3</sup> that gave

clinicians guidelines for the treatment of transsexual patients. However, this quickly solidified into a system of gate-keeping that kept many trans folks from accessing the medical care that they needed. People learned how to regurgitate a "classic" transsexual narrative that pleased psychologists and psychiatrists, thus granting them access to needed medical services. Although pressure from gay activists resulted in homosexuality being removed from the DSM by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 1973, GID was added to the DSM in 1980. For years now, many people in the transgender movement have criticized this diagnosis, asserting that it leads to unnecessary pathologizing of trans people, contributing to stigma, bias, and even abuse.

One of the film's most powerful interviews is with transgender artist Dylan Scholinski, author of the ground-breaking book *The Last Time I Wore a Dress*.<sup>4</sup> Dylan details the abuse he suffered when he was institutionalized in the 1980s for not conforming to dominant notions of femininity. The GID diagnosis can lead to efforts by psychologists and others to try to "cure" youth and adults of their atypical gender identity/expression. However, as the film makes clear, absolute consensus does not exist in the trans community regarding the GID diagnosis. Some community members fear that eliminating the diagnosis will make it harder or even impossible for trans people to access the medical care that they need. However, despite these concerns, the majority of interviewees favor reform or elimination of the diagnosis and see the pathologizing effects of the diagnosis as dangerous. As one interviewee asserts, trans people are actually the healthy ones in our gender-disordered society; it is people who unquestioningly accept dominant gen-

der roles that we should be concerned about. At the film's ending, one of the subjects, natoyiinastumiik, or Holy Old Man Bull, states that while nature loves diversity, human beings have an awful time with it. Natoyiinastumiik introduces the concept of Two-Spirit identity and Native American gender diversity, which is the topic of the next documentary.

"This is the true story of a Navajo boy who was also a girl." So begins *Two Spirits: Sexuality, Gender and the Murder of Fred Martinez*, a powerful meditation on Native American gender, sexuality, spirituality, and culture. It tells the story of a sixteen-year-old Navajo youth named Fred Martinez, who also went by the names F.C., Fredericka, and Beyoncé. Fred was a Two-Spirit (*Nadleeh*), gay-identified, and transgender individual who lived with his<sup>5</sup> mother and siblings in Cortez, Colorado. In 2001, he was bludgeoned to death by eighteen-year-old Shaun Murphy in a vicious hate crime that made national headlines. The film features extensive interviews with F.C.'s mother, Pauline Mitchell, and his friends, as well as a number of Native American Two-Spirit scholars and activists.

In addition to detailing the story of F.C.'s horrific murder, the documentary explicates the history of Native American gender diversity, where many nations had complex gender systems that did not conform to European notions of binary gender and strict heterosexuality. In general, these gender-diverse individuals were accepted and embraced by their Native communities and often served special roles such as herbalists, negotiators, healers, matchmakers, counselors and child-care providers. The film discusses how European "explorers" in North America attempted to destroy these gender-diverse traditions, and places this in the context of widespread geno-

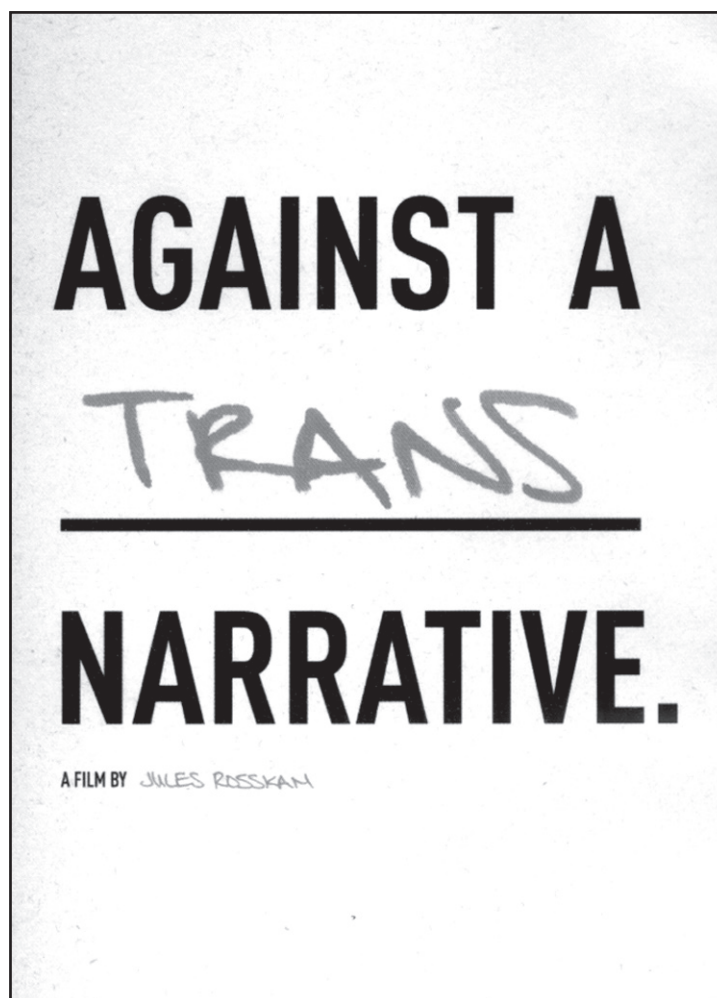
cide and cultural imperialism. Many Indigenous gender traditions have been lost as Euro-American and Christian hegemony have overtaken and pushed out acceptance of gender-variant and queer identities.<sup>6</sup>

The scholars and activists (such as Wesley Thomas) in the film provide a brilliant analysis of both historical and contemporary Two-Spirit traditions that function to place F.C.'s life in a larger sociocultural context. While some have argued over whether F.C. was *really* gay or *really* transgender, the film prefers to take an inclusive approach that suggests that Fred was who s/he was, which included aspects of gay, trans, Navajo, and *Nadleeh* identities that refused simplistic definition. The complexity of F.C.'s identity is also contextualized within the Euro-American history of gay identity (Harry Hay, The Mattachine Society, the Radical Faeries, etc.) and in relation to geography, ethnicity, and class: Fred lived in the Four Corners region of Colorado — where there is a mixture of Native Americans, Latinos, and Anglos — in a trailer park with his single-parented family, which struggled economically. Before he was murdered, F.C. attempted suicide, testifying to the impact that racism, homophobia, transphobia, and classism had on his life.

This documentary would be excellent to use in the classroom to explore alternative ways of classifying gender and sexuality and to compare those

Indigenous paradigms to American constructions, particularly America's emphasis on patriarchal masculinity. The greatest strength of this film is Pauline Mitchell, whose love for her

and Native identities. It also provides a much-needed counter-narrative to the medical model of transsexuality that has so dominated depictions of gender-variant people in Western culture.



child and grief at his untimely passing come through in every frame. She tells several stories that will bring tears to viewers' eyes and sear the imprint of F.C.'s short life into their consciousness. Pauline regularly visits his grave, bringing trinkets that he loved, including key chains, to leave there. One key chain reads: "Don't hate me because I'm beautiful." This film will change hearts and minds and add immeasurably to understandings of queer, trans,

Another film that succeeds in challenging "classical" transsexual narrative is the aptly titled *Against a Trans Narrative* — the most challenging of these five documentaries in terms of style and form. This is an experimental, non-linear piece composed of a diverse set of filmic genres, including acted vignettes, focus-group-like discussions, personal video diaries, spoken-word performance, varied interviews, and re-enactments of some of those interviews. The documentary uses postmodernism to invent a pastiche style that is difficult at first but surprisingly engaging. Produced by trans filmmaker Jules Roskam, *Against a Trans Narrative* explores the ways in which trans-masculine (FTM) subjects negotiate their identities in a world that has a very structured narrative for

how they are supposed to be and become in the world. Through the film's diverse genres, Roskam challenges the conventional narratives of trans existence and explores a variety of fascinating topics related to the expansion of gendered realities. These include very intimate dialogues with Jules's female partner, whose candid expressions about her difficulties with Jules's transition are refreshing and poignant. The



film also explores medical transition and the difficulty many people have accessing care, including the ways access to medical care for trans-masculine folks is related to race, class, and age. One of the important topics explored is the difficulty trans youth face in obtaining hormone treatment — a point that relates to a larger issue about how trans agency often threatens established protocols for transgender medical and psychological care. As does *Diagnosing Difference*, this film interrogates the traditional medical establishment for its gate-keeping practices and perpetuation of a care model that subordinates transgender agency and empowerment.

While I would not recommend *Against a Trans Narrative* for introductory women's/gender or LGBT studies classes, I think it would serve upper-level and even graduate-level courses well. Having sat through countless “trans 101” videos and presentations, I found it invigorating to watch a film that approaches the subject in a more sophisticated manner. *Against a Trans Narrative* takes trans identity for granted, pushing us further to deconstruct dominant understandings of gender identity and the ways the narrative of transsexuality as essentially a surgical phenomenon needs to be radically interrogated. Viewers must suspend their expectations of traditional documentary film, but the payoff is infinitely worth it. This film's intense and politicized discussions seem well-suited for sparking dialogue. I was particularly pleased by the extended discussion of trans-masculinity and its relationship to lesbianism, butch identity, and feminism.<sup>7</sup> Transgenderism's connection to feminist theory and activism is rarely covered; these discussions may incite rich and complex dialogue about the emerging field of transfeminism. The documentary also covers intergenera-

tional conflict around the reception of trans identities within feminist and lesbian-feminist communities, as well as the movement to interrupt static, bipolar notions of sex, gender, and sexuality in progressive movements.

*Against a Trans Narrative* dealt consistently with race, including what it means to be a white transman versus an African American transman. *Still Black: Portraits of Black Transmen* explores this theme in even greater focus through in-depth interviews with six African American transgender men. As mentioned in the introduction to this essay, the traditional representation of transgender people in documentary has been predominantly concerned with the experiences of white, middle-class, MTF transsexuals. FTMs were very invisible until the mid-1990s, when there was an explosion of FTM visibility in activism, academia, and artistic production. However, even within these new FTM cultural productions, emphasis continued to be on white, middle-class trans guys. *Still Black*, in contrast, puts trans men of color center stage,<sup>8</sup> asking probing questions that evoke rich responses about the interplay between race, gender identity/expression, socio-economic status, sexuality, and disability. The interviewees (Kylar Broadus, Ethan Young, Jay Welch, Nicholas Rashad, Louis Mitchell and Carl Madgett) are diverse in age, profession, sexuality, and other socio-cultural factors. It becomes immediately clear that although the focus is on transmen of African descent and there are similarities in experiences, there are also vital differences.

The black-and-white film consists almost entirely of footage from the interviews, with the camera shifting to different angles and positions to break up the monotony of a typical “talking-head” documentary. There is some

cover footage of Ethan getting a tattoo, Kylar talking on a panel at Harvard, Carl in church, and Jay performing spoken-word poetry. Some might wish for more such scenes apart from the interviews, but I think the minimalism augments and centralizes the interviewees' voices, experiences, and points of view. Transpeople of color have been silenced in white-supremacist, transphobic America. This film helps to shatter that silence, and the filmmaker's stylistic choices, as well as the incredibly profound insights of the interviewees, facilitate that process. While showing the entire 77-minute film is certainly appropriate, instructors could also choose to show just one or several of the interviews, depending on time constraints, since each interview can stand on its own. The interviews cover an impressive scope of topics: family, intimate relationships, employment, disability, sexuality, media depictions of Black men, racism, activism, and more.

Family and relationships are covered especially well in *Still Black*: all of the interviewees discuss kinship bonds with partners, parents, siblings, and friends, and reaction from friends and family is a prominent feature. The specious notion that the Black community is “more homophobic” or “more transphobic” is effectively countered by the subjects' stories of familial acceptance and support. The shift from being perceived as a Black woman to being read as a Black man illuminates the interconnectedness of race, gender, and class. Comparing the experiences of white trans guys to Black trans guys complicates the notion of “male privilege” in salient ways. In addition, Kylar Broadus's account of his pre-transition career as a corporate lawyer underscores our society's compulsory gendered expectations and how oppressive these are to everyone, especially those who do not identify with the sex assigned to them at birth. This film

will spark critical dialogues in women's studies, ethnic studies, and queer studies, and will illuminate the experiences of transmen of African descent in ways that break the silence surrounding trans-of-color subjectivities.

In the final documentary under review, a director turns the camera outward to explore how his transition affects those around him. *Switch: A Community in Transition* is also a highly informative and poignant reframing of trans identity, exploring the reactions of friends and family to the transition of Brooks Nelson, an FTM who lives in Portland, Oregon, with his female partner. Brooks's movement from female to male is explored through candid interviews with his longtime femme partner, his circle of (mostly) lesbian and butch/femme friends, his co-workers, his co-parishioners, his mother-in-law, and his progressive, multi-racial community in Portland.

The genius of *Switch* is the way it "switches up" the common framing of documentaries about trans identity. Usually, the primary or even sole focus is on the trans person, with little or no attention on the surrounding communities and social institutions. This often has the unintended effect of "otherizing" trans people and leaving the hetero-normative society and its gender rules off the hook. In moving the lens *away* from Brooks and *onto* his community, *Switch* cleverly shows the joys, struggles, and work undertaken by others to creatively and productively engage with gender, reflect on gender, and move to places of greater understanding and a celebration of difference.

I admire Brooks's dedication to initiating and engaging in "difficult dialogues" with his friends, partner, family, church, and workplace, including one with his African American trans-guy friend, Michel, about their different social locations as Black and

white transmen, and another with a gender-variant, female-bodied individual about the emotions that have come up for her as a result of *not* transitioning. What is gained and what is lost for Brooks's life partner through Brooks's transition from butch to living and presenting as a man? To unravel some of these thorny issues, Brooks asks each person in his tight circle of friends to write down (anonymously) a difficulty they or someone close to them has had in dealing with trans issues. One person writes, "I struggle with the ways I see trans people use medical means like surgery to modify their bodies, removing or adding body parts to align inner sense of self with outer expression. I wish this could happen another way. Not with knives or drugs." This relatively common sentiment in progressive queer and feminist circles is vitally important to discuss and reflect upon. While the film arrives at no facile conclusions, the discussions and dialogues engendered on the journey bring trans identity into much sharper focus and situate gender as an issue that all folks, trans and non-trans, must grapple with in increasingly complex ways.

Media is always a double-edged sword. For every glaringly offensive TV program or movie, there is another, often less visible, representation that breaks new ground and speaks truth to power. I believe that as more trans-identified people and allies become skilled in video production, we will see a shift in representations about gender-variant people. In fact, this shift has already begun, and it is not only the trans community that will benefit. As more and more sophisticated and challenging portraits of gender emerge, we will see a loosening of the gender scripts that so tightly control all of our lives. I am excited by the ways these films push the queer and trans envelope, and by the filmmakers' fierce

dedication to inclusion and social justice. The complex and diversified portraits of these documentaries ultimately help to humanize trans people as well as interrupt the limited ways we have been viewed by the world for decades. In *Diagnosing Difference*, almost all the interviewees make the point that they want trans people to be seen as human beings, as people. I am delighted to note that every one of these documentaries succeeds brilliantly in achieving this. Another world is possible, and these and other fine media texts are pointing us all toward that exciting horizon.

## Notes

1. The full text of my dissertation, *Reel Gender: Examining the Politics of Trans Images in Film and Media*, is available at <http://etd.ohiolink.edu/send-pdf.cgi/Ryan%20Joelle%20Ruby.pdf?bgsu1245709749>.
2. For more information about the GID diagnosis, including diagnostic criteria, please see Kelley Winter's site, *GID Reform Advocates*: <http://www.gidreform.org/gid30285.html>. Also, I highly recommend Winter's informative and brilliant book, *Gender Madness in American Psychiatry: Essays from the Struggle for Dignity* (Dillon, CO: GID Reform Advocates, 2008).
3. For more detailed information about the standards of care, please see the website of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (formerly the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association): <http://www.wpath.org/Documents/sovc6.pdf>.
4. Scholinski's powerful narrative is an excellent example of how the GID

diagnosis is used to justify abusive and damaging “treatment” in the name of gender “normalcy”: Daphne Scholinski & Jane Meredith Adams, *The Last Time I Wore a Dress: A Memoir* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998). For more about GID and its harm to youth, I recommend Phyllis Burke, *Gender Shock: Exploding the Myths of Male and Female* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996).

5. I use the male pronoun here because that is what was used in the film. However, given F.C.’s gender complexity, both feminine and gender-neutral pronouns might also be appropriate usage in order to express F.C.’s feminine and gender-transgressive identities.

6. For more about Two-Spirit identity, history, and culture, as well as Native American LGBT issues, please see Will Roscoe, ed., *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988); Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, & Sabine Lang, *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Lester Brown, *Two Spirit People: American Indian Lesbian Women and Gay Men* (New York: Haworth, 1997); Will Roscoe, *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998); Walter Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); Walter Williams & Toby Johnson, *Two Spirits: A Story of Life with the Navajo* (Maple Shade, NJ: Lethe Press, 2006). Also, please see the aforementioned film about Native queer identity: Michel Beauchemin, Lori Levy, & Gretchen Vogel, producers, *Two Spirit People* (San Francisco: Frameline, 1990).

7. Another film that examines trans-masculine identity in relation to lesbianism, butchness, and feminism is the documentary *Boy I Am*, directed by Sam Feder and Julie Hollar (New York: Women Make Movies, 2007).

8. A number of readings could be paired with the film *Still Black*, including Daisy Hernandez, “Becoming a Black Man,” in *Colorlines Magazine* (January 2008); Enoch Page & Matt Richardson, “On the Fear of Small Numbers: A Twenty-First-Century Prolegomenon of the U.S. Black Transgender Experience,” in *Black Sexualities: Probing Powers, Passions, Practices, and Policies*, by Juan Battle & Sandra Barnes (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), pp. 57–81; Imani Henry, “If I Should Die Before I Wake,” in *From the Inside Out: Radical Gender Transformation, FTM and Beyond*, ed. by Morty Diamond (San Francisco: Manic D Press, 2004), pp. 123–127; and Ellen Marie Hinchcliffe, “I Will Always Be Your Daughter. I Will Always Be Your Son: An Interview with Juma Blythe Essie,” in *Clamor Magazine*, no. 38 (Fall 2006): <http://clamormagazine.org/issues/38/gender.php>.

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