

The Ohio State University

The Transgender Talk Show Phenomenon:
How Our Society Has Failed Transgender Individuals in Public Conversations

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WGSST 2230: Gender Pop Culture

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December 10th, 2020

In a broad sense, gender has been one of the main focuses of the twenty-first century. Women's issues have been focused on in completely new ways, from the gender wage gap and workplace harassment to reproductive rights. However, only very recently has the public eye turned so fully toward discussions about transgender issues. As Time magazine so rightly put it, we have reached "The Transgender Tipping Point – America's next civil rights frontier" (Time cover, June 9th, 2014). Even in recent years, certain battles have been fought and won for the community. In 2019, the World Health Organization, or WHO, ended the classification of being transgender as a mental illness. In 2020, the Supreme Court clarified their interpretation of the wording in Titles VII and IX, allowing certain legal protections for trans individuals in employment, education, health care, housing, and more. While transgender issues aren't new, they've never had quite this much visibility or traction.

Being that the issues are new to the mainstream, we're recognizing a certain clumsiness around the discussions taking place in our media. This clumsiness alludes to the unequal power dynamic between cisgender and transgender individuals, and the fact that we're able to see and call out this faux pas is a great testament to how our views are changing and evolving. The platform where we see this most recognizably is that of talk show interviews between cisgender interviewers and transgender interviewees.

On her show *Katie* in early January of 2014, Katie Couric interviewed popular trans model Carmen Carrera. Initially, the interview seemed to be going well. Couric asked her about an online petition that fans had created to convince Victoria's Secret to have her as the first transgender angel, a relevant question about her career. They then talked for a moment about her public transition, and seeing as Carrera became famous before she transitioned, this question wasn't too out of the ordinary. However, then came the moment that many unfortunately

expected: Couric asked about Carrera's surgeries. Carrera seemed uncomfortable for a moment but then talked briefly about her rhinoplasty and breast augmentation. Couric, almost chomping at the bit, jumped in with one of the worst questions you could ask a transgender individual, "Your, your, your private parts are different now, aren't they?" Carrera responded to this by quite literally shushing Katie Couric and answered her in the extremely eloquent way that follows. "I don't wanna talk about it, because it's, it's still, it's really personal. And um, I don't know, I'd rather talk about my modeling stuff. I'd rather talk about being a W [model], and being, you know, maybe in Italian Vogue, and doing fun stuff and showing people that after their transition there's still life to live. There's still, you know, I still have my career goals, I still have my family goals... I wanna have more kids, you know like, I wanna focus on that rather than what's down here, because that's been spoken about so many times, you know, like in other interviews with other trans people. They always focus on either the transition or the genitalia, and I feel like... there's more to trans people than just that." Couric showed some tact here and was able to respect Carrera's request to not discuss the topic further, but the damage had been done. Couric had followed the common trend in journalism of sensationalism by valuing the shock factor of Carrera's transition and genitalia because she believed that viewers would be hooked more by those topics than by the mundane aspects of Carrera's career. Through this, Katie Couric effectively tokenized Carmen Carrera and her experience as a trans woman. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word tokenism as "the fact of doing something only in order to... satisfy a particular group of people, but not in a way that is really sincere." And that is exactly what happened in this interview.

It's quite obvious that the question asked was wildly offensive, whether asked to someone in an interview, or a friend you've known your whole life. But sadly, this invasiveness

is nothing new to the trans community. There's an entire section of the Netflix documentary *Disclosure* on the discussions of and with trans people that have taken place in interviews or articles, and the tokenization that occurred. *Disclosure* first starts the topic with Christine Jorgensen, a trans woman who transitioned publicly in 1952. She was the first person to become globally famous for transitioning, and as Susan Stryker and Laverne Cox put it in the film, she was a pivotal figure in trans history. With Christine Jorgensen's fame came the media's obsession over surgery when talking about transgender individuals, which persists even to this day. The documentary then follows up the discussion on Christine Jorgensen with a multitude of cuts from talk shows, which all show one thing painfully clearly: the disrespect that trans people endured in the public eye. As Ser Anzoategui quite fittingly put it, "It's sort of like a circus." And when you watch the clips, it was. For the longest time, transgender individuals were brought on different talk shows like Maury, ABC's 20/20, The Joan Rivers Show, and The Jerry Springer Show, to name a few. Once on these shows, very often the topic wasn't their careers or trans social justice issues, but rather their surgeries, their transition, their life before transitioning, nothing seemed to be off-limits. These shows would invite these trans individuals under the guise of educating the public and then would allow the audience to ask some very invasive, and quite frankly transphobic, questions. It was very much like a circus in the regard that it allowed people to see and prod at transgender individuals.

The producers behind the shows, as well as the interviewers, are attempting to show that they're being very progressive and inclusive towards the transgender community, but the truth of the matter is that they don't show that they care about the community at all. Nowhere in these interviews do we feel as though these trans people are being seen or heard as human beings, but rather they're being objectified, used for the excitement around the taboo nature of their lives.

This duality of being seen and yet still being marginalized is explained in Judith Butler's piece *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, where she asks, "Who will be stigmatized and disenfranchised at the same time that they become the object of fascination and consumer pleasure?" (34-35). As more transgender people are being accepted and put into the spotlight, it seems that the countless interviewers, journalists, and consumers of this media are lacking empathy. Transgender individuals are not people putting on a show for entertainment, they're people who have endured various struggles at the hands of our society.

Something very problematic about this objectification of trans individuals in the media is that it perpetuates the historical idea that trans individuals are *less than* and can therefore be treated as something other than human. As trans historian and activist, Susan Stryker put it in her famous speech and subsequent article, *My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix*, where she shared her comparison of transgender individuals and Frankenstein's monster, "Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment" (245). As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the World Health Organization, only ended its categorization of being transgender as a mental disorder in 2019. This in and of itself goes to show the lack of respect and legitimacy that has been shown to both transgender individuals and their social issues, even as recently as just over a year ago. When viewed in the context of the history of injustices against the transgender community, we can see just how damaging these interviews and media portrayals can be.

It is at this point that I would like to discuss how transgender people fit into our definition of gender in western society. We live in a society that values what is called the gender binary, meaning that we view a person's gender as one of two options: man, or woman. Many people living in western society believe this view to be a global view when in reality many cultures have

more than just two genders. In Native American culture, there's a third gender called two spirit, which is viewed as neither male nor female (Indian Health Service.) In Samoan society, there is a third gender referred to as fa'afafine, which refers to individuals who are assigned male at birth, but then raised 'in the manner of a woman,' the literal translation of the word fa'afafine (The Encyclopedia of New Zealand.) The gender binary, and more specifically, society's persistence in maintaining this binary, can lead to a lot of discrimination and gendered issues. Anyone who challenges this gender status quo can expect backlash. In the same piece mentioned before, Susan Stryker says "Because transsexuality [an outdated term for transgender individuals]... represents the prospect of destabilizing the foundational presupposition of fixed genders upon which a politics of personal identity depends, people... say things about us out of sheer panic that, if said of other minorities, would see print only in the most hate-riddled, white supremacist, Christian fascist rags" (245). In the same book mentioned before, Judith Butler again outlines the violence performed against individuals who don't conform to the regular understanding of gender in our society. "In this way, precarity is, perhaps obviously, directly linked with gender norms, since we know that those who do not live their genders in intelligible ways are at heightened risk for harassment, pathologization, and violence. Gender norms have everything to do with how and in what way we can appear in public space, how and in what way the public and private are distinguished, and how that distinction is instrumentalized in the service of sexual politics" (34). In this way, Butler is explaining how people who don't adhere to the gender roles within the gender binary are less protected within society. To put this in numerical terms; according to the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey, around half (46%) of respondents reported experiencing verbal assault and about 1 in 10 (9%) reported being physically assaulted within that year because of their transgender identities.

This is especially obvious when looking at the history of gender expression in the United States. As early as 1848, and lasting to at least 1974, there were laws against dressing in clothing that belonged to the opposite gender. Not only was this restrictive to cisgender individuals who wanted to wear certain clothing, but it was also very invalidating to transgender individuals. A transgender woman during this time would be forced to wear men's clothing, not only restricting her from the gender affirmation of wearing the clothing of her gender identity but also reinforcing the idea that she, as a human being, was not valid.

Another factor that comes about because of the gender binary in our society is a kind of genital fascination, and we see this in more places than just television interviews. One way that this becomes very, very clear is in how we handle the births of intersex children. Someone who is intersex is born with genitalia that doesn't conform to what we understand as male or female, but instead is somewhere in the middle. Doctors have created a protocol for these births in which the baby is assigned a sex and then undergoes surgery to make the genitalia look more like the standard for the assigned sex. In her book on the subject, titled *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*, Anne Fausto-Sterling says, "Rather than force us to admit the social nature of our ideas about sexual difference, our ever more sophisticated medical technology has allowed us, by its attempts to render such bodies male or female, to insist that people are either naturally male or female." (54). In this quote, she explains how this decision in medical science to choose a sex for intersex individuals allows us to reinforce our ideas of gender and sex, rather than learn from intersex individuals and expand our knowledge and understanding around the topic.

This focus on genitalia, and the scientific study we have based around genitalia, spills over into transgender politics as well. Since a transgender individual's sex and gender don't

align, we focus on what makes their sex and gender different: their genitals. One way that we do this is through the neoliberal idea of passing. In this school of thought, a transgender individual is only valid if they fully and completely pass as the gender that they identify as. This includes physically, which is why there is so much attention on the genitals of transgender individuals – they only truly pass once they have undergone surgery to change their genitals. The more they look like a cisgender woman (which is problematic since there is no standard for looking like a woman, cisgender or otherwise), the more they will be considered to pass.

This is what has led countless interviewers to ask transgender interviewees about surgery. This is what led Katie Couric to ask Carmen Carrera about her genitals. When a transgender individual is told that a person wouldn't know that they were transgender without being told (Which is often said to them at the beginning of a debasing interview), this is society's way of applauding them on their ability to pass. The invasive questioning that follows is almost a way of testing to see if they fully pass, seeking answers to questions that can't be answered just by looking at them. The real question to come from these interactions is this: where do cisgender people find the sense of entitlement to ask these questions?

When looking at all of the information provided in this essay, the answer to this question seems quite obvious. Because cisgender people feel that they are normal due to their ability to adhere to their understanding of the gender binary, they view transgender people as being abnormal. And since transgender people are abnormal, the rules of common courtesy need not apply. However, in reality, this way of thinking doesn't work. By subjecting trans people to exist as a foreign 'other,' cis people have dehumanized the trans community and put them at higher risk when it comes to issues such as violence, sexual assault, homelessness, suicide, and more.

This can all feel very disheartening when looking at interactions between cisgender and transgender individuals, but it doesn't always have to be. While many people who have spoken insensitively to and about transgender individuals in the past may never understand the incorrectness of what they've done, or the issues facing the transgender community at large, a great many people are taking it upon themselves to learn and grow from past experiences. A great example of this would have to be Katie Couric. After the fiasco that was her interview with Carmen Carrera, she went on and learned from her mistakes, educating herself and others through her documentary on transgender and intersex issues titled *Gender Revolution*. The documentary *Disclosure* explains that any representation that exposes the public to positive examples of the trans community helps to bridge the divide caused by the 'othering' of trans people. *Gender Revolution* and other documentaries on the topic exemplify this, as do more dramatic forms, such as the popular television show *Pose*, which explores the lives of transgender individuals in 1980s New York in a very realistic and truthful way.

In the long term, I think that the goal should be a total recalibration of what we as a society understand about sex, gender, and gender expression. As Anne Fausto-Sterling says, "If we choose, over a period of time, to let mixed-gender bodies and altered patterns of gender-related behavior become visible, we will have... chosen to change the rules of cultural intelligibility" (76). What she means is that by allowing people to be themselves, and identify publicly as they do personally, we can create a more open and understanding society. One within which insensitive questionings on television won't happen, because we will value and understand all lives to be valid and equal, no matter how differently they identify from us.

Despite all of the progress that has been made in recent years, we're still nowhere near this goal. We may never get there, and many people don't believe that we will or don't want us

to. However, it's also not hard to see how we as a society could benefit exponentially even just by opening our minds to this possibility. Of course, I don't believe that this change will happen overnight, but I choose to be optimistic in believing that someday in the future if more people commit themselves to growth such as Katie Couric has, it could very well become our new reality.

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