

Hegemonic Heterosexuality in the Film “Boy’s Don’t Cry”

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Brandon Teena was an American transgender male who was brutally raped and murdered by John L. Lotter and Marvin Thomas “Tom” Nissen in Humboldt, Nebraska. Brandon was only 21 years old when his life tragically ended. After reading about the life and death of Brandon, Kimberly Peirce spent almost five years conducting extensive research for her 1999 biographical film, Boy’s Don’t Cry that she directed and wrote with Andy Bienen. Peirce focused the story of the film on the relationship between Brandon and his girlfriend Lana Tisdel. The main themes explored in the film include the nature of romantic and platonic relationships, the source of violence toward transgender individuals, gender binaries, and the intersections of social class, race, gender, and sexuality. In this essay, I connect the main themes of the film to Jonathan Katz’ 1990 essay, The Invention of Heterosexuality, which traces the development of the terms heterosexual and homosexual throughout history, as well as notions of hegemonic heteronormativity, gender expectations, sexual categorization, and sexual identity. I also examine specific characters within the film that affected the life and death of Brandon, including Lana Tisdel, John Lotter, Tom Nissen, and Sheriff Charles B. Laux, the sheriff who negligently declined to arrest John and Tom for rape.

Written after Brandon Teena’s death, *Boys Don’t Cry*, directed by Kimberly Peirce, offers a subversive depiction of Brandon’s identity and the hegemonic heterosexuality within society that affected his life. In his essay “The Invention of Heterosexuality,” Jonathan Katz challenges the common notion that the distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality has been a timeless one. Katz considers the effects of heterosexuality that has forged primacy in society that have resulted in hegemonic heteronormativity, a dominant force that takes place in

the film, *Boys Don’t Cry*. Gender and sexual nonconformists are rarely made visible to the public through media or film. When nonconformist ideals of sexuality are seen in media or even in society, they are rarely positive. Thus, human freedom to explore sex and sexuality are often repressed, a fact which is exposed in this film. With scenes of dark open spaces, the characters in the film appear to be isolated, hindered by sexual categorizing and sex-biology, serving the interests of heteronormative views, which oppress individual freedom of sexuality.



I was born and raised in Honolulu, Hawai‘i. I recently graduated from the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa in May 2017 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology. I plan to pursue a Master’s degree in Psychology, focusing on young adult life, relationships, and mental health. I wrote this essay for an English/Women Studies course taught by Professor Cynthia Franklin, which focused on gender, sexuality, and literature. Throughout the process of writing this essay, I began to discover the ways in which society influences sexuality and gender in a manner that oppresses freedom of exploration. The most interesting and also challenging aspect of writing this essay was researching and learning about Brandon Teena’s short but significant life. Gender and sexuality are important topics that need to be addressed, especially during adolescence, an age in which people are just beginning to form an identity.

From the beginning of the film, Brandon attempts to conform to various socially constructed gender norms of the male figure. In his essay on the invention of heterosexuality, Katz draws upon the works of Alfred Kinsey, a sex scientist who popularized the idea of a continuum of activity and feeling between the heterosexual and homosexual. Kinsey challenged the idea of an absolute either/or antithesis between a heterosexual and homosexual person. He rejected the belief that human beings innately represent two distinct populations and saw this categorizing as a profound subjective force of a historically constructed tradition, which helped to establish the social and personal identity of a heterosexual or homosexual individual. Due to society, the term heterosexual became the “good” type of citizen and the term homosexual became the “bad” type of citizen. In the film, Brandon’s behavior is based on external expectations of masculinity and heterosexuality, a result of the division between heterosexual and homosexual. This assumed masculinity highlights certain gender and heterosexual norms in which males need to exert specific characteristics in order to become accepted by society.

The sex scene between Brandon and Lana Tisdell portrays the common practices of heterosexuality, in which men take control through dominant positioning in sexual encounters. The social construction of masculinity is amplified throughout the film as Brandon embraces characteristics that are normalized by society. In society, boys are often given leading roles while girls are often given subordinate roles. Brandon takes on a heterosexual male role by asserting power and positioning himself on top of Lana during intercourse. Lana is placed into a submissive position commonly associated with women as Brandon becomes the penetrator and she becomes the penetrated. It is significant to note that during their sexual experience, Brandon could not experience an orgasm as Lana had because he didn’t want his sex-biology to be known. This suggests an answer to a question Katz proposes in his essay, “would human freedom be enhanced if the sex-biology of our partners in lust was of no particular concern, and had no name?”¹ Both Brandon and Lana’s freedom to explore their sexuality, identity, and behavior in sexual encounters would be enhanced if Brandon’s sex-biology were of no concern. It is through the

division of the heterosexual and homosexual structures that influence and produce categorizations that confine individual’s competencies and behaviors based on their assumed gender roles.

Heterosexuality is represented as hegemonic in the film. Hegemony is practiced by those who are dominant in society to control public perception in a way that ensures they will stay in power. In the film, these dominant forces in society would be considered those who enforced heterosexuality onto Brandon, such as John Lotter and Tom Nissen, who both brutally raped, assaulted, and murdered Brandon. In his essay, Katz extensively examines how this form of hegemony works in our society. He proposed that the term *heterosexual* manufactured a new sex differentiated ideal of the erotically correct, a norm that succeeded to affirm the superiority of men over women and heterosexuals over homosexuals. The term heterosexual and homosexual moved into American popular culture between the 1890s and 1960s, constructing in time a hetero center and a homo margin, a hetero majority and a homo minority, an ideal individual and a perverted unstable outsider. These strict boundaries and division between homosexual and heterosexual made the new gendered, erotic world less polymorphous, focusing more on sexual categorizing.

The film presents evidence that sexual naming and categorizing in America’s heartland (the Midwest) was of extreme necessity to those who emulate hegemonic heterosexuality, which correlates to another question proposed in Katz’ essay, “What has been the social function of sexual categorizing?” (77). The categorization of gender based on biological sex dictates the way individuals behave toward one another. Individuals often make inferences about feminine and masculine identities based on surface information. John and Tom were unaware of Brandon’s biological sex until Brandon is arrested on previous charges and placed in the local women’s detention center. After seeing his name in the local newspaper as Teena Brandon, the two men confront Brandon at Lana’s mother’s home. John and Tom then force Brandon into the bathroom and physically remove his pants and underwear, which emphasizes societies need to identify gender based on one’s biological sex. John and Tom’s hegemonic masculinity, which is framed in relation to subordinated heterosexuality, lead to their need to categorize Brandon based on gender as a way to position themselves in relation to him.

In determining legalities, legal institutions often reduce a person’s identity to their biological sex. After

1 Jonathan Katz, “The Invention of Heterosexuality” (University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 77. Further references will occur in the body of this essay. Katz proposing questions about the invention of heterosexuality.

John and Tom brutally rape Brandon, he finds a way to escape from the two men and attempts to file a report with the local police. However, the local police were of no help to Brandon. Sheriff Charles B. Laux was the lead sheriff working at the time Brandon attempted to file a police report. Sheriff Laux questioned Brandon about the rape, however during the interview the focus was taken away from the crime itself and shifted toward the categorization of gender and sexuality. Sheriff Laux asked Brandon, "Doesn't it kind of get your attention somehow that he wouldn't just put his hand in your pants and just play with you a little bit?"² This is a question that is both demeaning and offensive toward Brandon, especially coming from a person of authority. The Sheriff was only interested in categorizing Brandon and getting him to acknowledge the fact that he was biologically female, another example of how sexual categorizing functions in society. The sheriff then ignorantly places blame on Brandon for the rape because of his "misleading" gender. In the film, authority figures such as Sheriff Laux feel the need to categorize Brandon's sexuality and gender in order to determine the legality of a rape and assault, an extremely serious crime that should have put John and Tom in jail immediately. Sheriff Laux was more concerned with categorizing Brandon's sexuality and gender, than he was with keeping Brandon safe and consequently, the sheriff declined to have them arrested due to "lack of evidence." In doing so, Sheriff Laux failed to prevent Brandon's death as well as being an indirect cause.

Hegemonic heterosexual men remain dominant in the film due to the stern division of the heterosexual and homosexual. Any sort of deviation from gender norms causes a person to become a target of social disapproval. In the film, John and Tom model hegemonic heterosexuality and reinforce it as a way for them to remain dominant over women. This provides an answer to the question Katz proposes in his essay, "Whose interests have been served by the division of the world into heterosexual and homosexual?" (77). In many ways Brandon emulated masculinity to a higher standard than John and Tom, especially by winning over Lana, who is John's ex girlfriend. Since, Brandon was biologically female, he was someone who transgressed gender binaries, which became a threat to the "natural" order of things in the

eyes of John and Tom. Once they proved Brandon was biologically female, their idea of reinforcing gender binaries and hegemonic heterosexuality was through rape and violence. This is exactly what Katz suggests the term *heterosexual* has established in our society, a hegemonic binary system that upholds the superiority of men over women and heterosexuals over homosexuals.

The construction of gender, particularly when it comes to heterosexual males, has led to many negative characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity. These characteristics often include violence and aggression used in homophobic hate crimes committed by men. In this film, Peirce offers insight into the relationship between knowledge, power, violence, and sexuality, in relation to hegemonic heterosexuality. A key component of hegemonic masculinity is seeing women as sexual objects, used to provide heterosexual men with sexual validation. Although the rape scene was extremely difficult to watch, it was necessary to the film's representation of the extent to which individuals may go to enforce heterosexuality. John and Tom rape Brandon after they uncover Brandon's biological sex, which depicts gendered violence used as a way to assert their masculinity over Brandon. After Brandon is forced to expose himself as a female, John and Tom bring Brandon to an abandoned parking lot where they viciously beat and rape him. The two men use rape and violence to reinforce their masculinity by making Brandon take the role of a submissive female. The need for hegemonic heterosexual men to have power over women is portrayed in the film by John and Tom's use of gendered violence and rape.

With the tragic ending of Brandon's life, taken by John and Tom, it is clear that Brandon's identity and sexuality were never free. After John and Tom learn about the police report Brandon attempted to file with Sheriff Laux, the two men become intoxicated and set out to kill Brandon. The two men confront Brandon at Lana's friend Candace's house in which Brandon was seeking shelter. John then shoots both Brandon and Candace in the head in front of Candace's infant child. John then stabs Brandon repeatedly in the abdomen before fleeing the scene. The film ends with a scene of a car heading down a deserted open road, the road in which Brandon and Lana planned on going down to escape from their family and "friends." The dark, wide-open road represents the freedom Brandon had sought his whole life. In order for him to be seen as a real "man," he could only show certain parts of himself that were defined by society as "masculine." Brandon's life portrayed in the film shows the re-

2 Kimberly Peirce, *Boy's Don't Cry* (Hart-Sharp Entertainment, 1999). Further references will occur in the body of this essay. Sheriff Charles B. Laux questioning Brandon about his rape and assault.

stricting elements of categorizing gender and sexuality, which was produced and imposed on him by a hegemonic heterosexual society.

In American culture, individuals find the need to fit into a perfectly defined category. Our culture is devoted to the notion that there needs to be a division between heterosexual and homosexual, between masculinity and femininity. This social construction of gender and sexuality have proved to be oppressing to human freedom and uphold hegemonic heterosexuality, which significantly affected Brandon's life and subsequently ended it. Katz proposes a pertinent question that can conclude what Peirce has conveyed in *Boy's Don't Cry*. Katz asks in his essay, "In what kind of society could we more freely explore our desire and our flesh?" (77). In a society in which hegemonic heteronormative ideologies do not dominate, individuals can more freely explore their

desires and flesh. The misguided social perceptions of gender and sexuality need to be reexamined and properly understood. Brandon Teena's life and death are worthy of attention from society, as it represents an individual who transgressed forms of masculinity and disrupted the hegemonic norm.

Work Cited

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