

# Women & Performance:

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## **The ties that bind are fragile and often imaginary: Community, identity politics, and the limits of representation**

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On April 8th, 2008, Thomas Beatie shocked the world. A pregnant man! The messiah is here! The world is ending! Someone. Quick. Go tell it on the mountain. Wait, what's that? He's not really a man? He is really a woman with a beard, masquerading as a man? Oh, well that's not news. Gross. Change the channel. Make it go away.

For most people in the mainstream, the preceding reflects the narrative ushered forth by the media, who proclaimed to introduce the "world's first pregnant man." Given the media's propensity to reduce complex issues into simplistic, dualistic forms, can we blame mainstream audiences for adhering to this narrative? They were left with little to no other options. The headlines claimed "Pregnant Man" and pregnant man they wanted. But then, the first or second sentence of nearly every article written or news story delivered declared that Thomas was a man – sort of. "The Pregnant Man" headline was the edge of a steep cliff, inviting most people to run to it and fall obediently over the gendered-edge. But we knew this would happen – at least I knew this would happen. In 2005, I released a film entitled *transparent*, about trans-men who bore children. The film included 19 female-to-male transsexuals ranging in age from 19 to 60, from various racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds. We traveled to 14 different states, predominantly in "middle" America, demonstrating that trans and queer folks don't only live on the coasts in big cities. Thus, Thomas' pregnancy is nothing new; it's not news to those who are part of, or who are plugged into trans communities. Men have been having babies for years.

When I was asked to write something about Thomas Beatie, I was flattered and immediately accepted. I thought, "here is something I know about; what an easy thing to write about." I was dead wrong. I wasn't wrong about "knowing" something about the subject, but I was wrong to think that I cared. I just don't care about Thomas. I am tired of people asking me what I think about Thomas and what his appearance on Oprah or Barbara Walters, or Discovery Channel (and soon the Sundance Channel) means for the trans community. I think it means nothing. People have already forgotten about Thomas, which was

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evidenced by the fact that his announcement that he was pregnant again fell on mostly deaf ears.

It makes perfect sense that the media ate Thomas up. Thomas is attractive, he "passes," he is intelligent but not intellectual, he's middle class, he's ostensibly straight, and most importantly he wants to be "just like everyone else." He's a "normal guy that just wants to have a family." Almost a decade ago there was a prominent couple in San Francisco (one FTM and one butch identified person) who made it into the major local papers as well as the Village Voice because the trans person in the relationship had gotten pregnant. Why didn't the mainstream media pick up their story instead of Thomas' some eight years later? Well, because they were too queer for the mainstream. They were poly, kinky, tattooed and pierced queers with no interest in marriage or the mainstream. This was not a pretty package that the media could pick up and sell to middle America. It should also be noted that this couple did not receive an open armed reception from the trans community as a whole. As a matter of fact they received many death threats from trans and other queer folks for making those who called themselves trans look too "weird." Their public existence threatened the ability of more assimilated trans folks to gain acceptance into the mainstream.

Despite Thomas' waning celebrity, the emergence of "the world's first pregnant man" pointedly reminded me that a dominant narrative persists: that most people's conceptions of gender disallow them to see an individual who gives birth as anything other than a woman. This was clearly evidenced by the many comments I waded through on the Oprah website, The Advocate, and so on. Sometimes there would be one or two "nice" comments to start the conversation off, then someone would bring in god and talk about what an "abomination" Thomas was; there is only man and woman, blah, blah, blah. Someone would respond in this vein:

The only abomination...is blind prejudice and hatred. Humans come in many varieties...Who are any of you to judge another simply because they are not you.

Very nice. Right? Then the conversation goes back and forth pro/con and inevitably there is the plea to leave Thomas alone because he isn't hurting anyone. To which you see a response like this:

If this woman is so self absorbed as to seek publicity for getting knocked up, at the same time calling herself a man...how much stability will she bring to raising two children? THAT's who she's hurting, you dope...

Inevitably the conversation devolves into a debate over the "science of sex/gender."

Stop saying a pregnant man. Now, if u removed the uterus and fallopian tubes then that would be different. I have nothing against transgenders but this person is not transgender...have the full operation and then I have no problem calling her a man...

And this is when I have to tear myself away from the computer before I rip all of my hair out. Even people who consider themselves to be "supportive" cannot accept the gender identity an individual claims for them self; it must be backed up by hard physical evidence – in this case, forced sterilization. Suffice it to say, this was the conclusion the mainstream media was seeking to reinforce. The story was not framed

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in such a way where audiences were meant to relate to and empathize with Thomas. It was set up as a good old-fashioned circus freak show.

I suppose I could launch into a full-on critical analysis of how the media framed this story. I could say that given the way our current media functions there is no room for expressions of radical or complex identifications, via gender, race, sexuality, ability and class. We do not stand for these things in this context. Everything must be neatly organized into its single-identity category. No border crossing allowed, nothing in the grey areas. But this is also nothing new. I would be beating the same drum that has been beaten by other, far more qualified, scholars and critics. I am neither of these things. I'm critical, but I doubt that qualifies me as a critic. I don't have a PhD, which I believe excludes me from the ivory tower. I'm an artist, an activist, and a person who identifies as trans. Perhaps this only qualifies me to offer a personal opinion. So let's be clear, that's what I'm offering here.

If there is anything to be learned from Thomas Beatie, it is simply that we cannot keep expecting one person to represent an entire community. He is not the trans-ambassador to the cisgendered world. He is one person looking to get *his* version of trans told. I have no expectations for the mainstream media to present a more complex version of trans than the tired old line of, "I am a man trapped in a woman's body" (or vice versa). Cisgender (and some transgendered) people are comfortable with this because it makes sense to them. It elicits pity, and therefore sympathy, and therefore perhaps some sort of conditional acceptance. One can turn to oneself – horrified – and think, "I wouldn't want to be trapped in the wrong body. How terrible, how sad, that poor person." Do I understand why some trans folks are angry that Thomas put himself out there in the ways that he did (and continues to do)? Absolutely. Am I angry too? Absolutely. Does my anger have to do with Thomas in particular? Absolutely not. Thomas is merely a reminder of a few painful facts. He reminds us, in the trans community, that we are divided (as so-called communities always are) and he reminds those of us who long for a space to articulate more complex understandings of sex and gender that the mainstream media does not yet offer it up.

As someone who makes media, specifically documentaries, I've been burdened with the historical baggage this medium carries – namely, the ethics of representation. There is never a good or simple answer to the question: "What is the most politically progressive, egalitarian way of making a story about (fill in the blank)?" With such standards in mind, no matter how I make the film, and for whom I make it, I will always fail on some level. This quandary is particularly troublesome when documenting something in the present tense, or attempting to document a particular community. These subjects are living breathing things, apt to change at any moment. The second I stop filming, my film is out of date, passé, or just inaccurate. I will never be able to represent the full spectrum of identities in a community, nor the full complexity of those lives; therefore someone will always feel as though they are not being represented by my film, and sometimes people I do represent will even feel *wronged* by the insufficiency of that representation.

Not only must film makers deal with people who feel inaccurately portrayed but sometimes we must deal with individuals who experience serious regret after the fact.



Towards the end of finishing the edit of my documentary *transparent*, which took me almost a year and a half – having to wade through 150 hours of footage for a one hour film – one of my participants emailed me and told me he wasn't sure he wanted to be in the film anymore. He told me that he felt uncomfortable about how candid he'd been about his pregnancy, his son, and other very personal issues. I nearly dropped the phone.

I listened to all of his concerns, somewhat paralysed by what felt like an ethical dilemma. I didn't know how to respond, because I did not want to try to convince him to be in the film if that was ultimately not what he wanted. Legally, I had every right to keep him in the film, as he'd signed a release form. I told him that regardless of the contract, I would never keep someone in the film who felt uncomfortable, unsafe, or unsure about their participation. Ultimately, I didn't say much of anything in reaction to his concerns, because I felt whatever I said could be in some way construed as trying to convince him against, possibly, his better judgment. So I told him I'd wait a week and he could let me know for sure at that end of that time. Thankfully, he decided to stay in the film and in the end I believe this decision was actually helpful to him and not just the other people who got to hear his story.

Additionally, with the whole Thomas media frenzy there was a small surge of interest in *transparent* in the mainstream press. *Inside Edition* was doing a piece on Thomas and they contacted my distributor about using some clips from *transparent*. My knee jerk reaction was to say no, but after careful consideration I decided to go forward. The only caveat was for them to alter several aspects of their reporting. They had categorized Thomas as "Odd News," which we required them to change. To my shock they did this immediately, and seemed to understand why it was offensive to have put him there in the first place. In addition, we had them rephrase all the headlines (in order to be less sensationalistic) and it was agreed that we would approve the script for the story before it aired. Ultimately, the piece was not horrible but it certainly wasn't *good*. In the end I can't actually say if I thought it was worth it or not, if I actually made a dent in the way this one outlet was covering Thomas, or if any of the information I gave them about accurately and respectfully portraying trans people will carry over into the next story. But I can say that I tried.

I can also be certain that some people who saw this story or heard about it thought I was inserting myself into the fray to try to make a buck. I am sure there are also some people who think I'm a bad activist for even being a part of something like *Inside Edition*. Maybe I am, I just don't know what the right answer is and sometimes I wish I didn't care. This is the burden of media makers: to constantly question everything you do.

The burden is deep and sometimes painful, but it is ours. That's right, it's ours, not just mine and other media makers. We, as media-makers and audience members are in this together, a community of sorts and we must recognize the limits of representation. This is not to say that media-makers should not be held accountable when they exploit communities and/or when they intentionally sensationalize aspects of people's lives, but we must learn to recognize intentions and we must not expect one film (or news story) to make everything right. As audience members we must also acknowledge that we bring an entire conveyor belt of our own baggage to these

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representations, and in turn must recognize our own – possibly disproportionate – expectations that we put onto media texts.

Perhaps this expectation we bring to media texts begins with our desire for language to represent us, to reflect our experiences. Certainly many LGBT identified folks search for that particular word that describes them, and once they find it they hold onto it with an unparalleled fervor. One can find evidence of this at nearly any LGBT conference or even blog. I was perusing a queer blog, whose name escapes me right now, and stumbled upon a thread in which folks were discussing the “Thomas issue.” The conversation veered off on a tangent about the intersections of butch and trans identities, in which a butch-identified person (who was clearly supportive of trans folks) used the term trans-masculine to describe folks who were assigned female at birth but now identify in some way on the “masculine spectrum.” I thought the post was respectful, supportive, and provocative. The next post was from an FTM-identified person who tore into the butch for using the term trans-masculine, because he felt the word did not encompass his identity, which then derailed what was a useful conversation about the intersections of trans and butch identities into a conversation about whether the initial poster was being “transphobic” or not. This interaction points to a huge problem.

Some of us seemingly cannot distinguish between good and bad intentions. It was quite clear in this case that the butch poster was trans supportive and was in no way trying to offend this one FTM by using the term “trans-masculine” (a term I happen to like and find to be way more inclusive than FTM, for instance), and yet he railed on her for her “insensitivity.” The problem of course is that there isn’t one word we (trans people) all use to describe ourselves, which is why people are always coming up with new terms. It is useless to take up arms against someone who calls you “trans-masculine” instead of FTM, when that person is clearly “on your side,” or at least she was until you yelled at her for such a discrepancy. Even when someone calls me she, because they don’t know I use he, I don’t yell at them, unless I feel that it is an intentional way of disrespecting my identity. For instance, when some gay men find out I’m trans they immediately switch from calling me he to calling me she. In that case, I say yell away. If we are actually listening to people, we usually know who is intentionally disrespecting us and who isn’t.

We defend our chosen terms because we have so little representation to hold onto – be it in language or image – so little that is actually out there about us. We all want each film that comes out to be the one that is about *us*, that represents *us* like all the others have failed to do. And this is not an irrational desire; we all want that reflection, that validation, that historical document. However, I would like to see people develop slightly more nuanced critiques of the films that don’t meet their expectations. If you feel the film did not represent *you*, perhaps that was not the intent of the film and so perhaps it’s not actually a fault in the film, but rather in your expectations.

For instance, I just released a new film, entitled *against a trans narrative*, and it premiered in April at the London Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. I had the pleasure of attending the screening and conducting a Q and A afterwards. The film was extremely well received and towards the end of the conversation an older



transwoman raised her hand. She said that she almost didn't want to say what she was about to say because overall she thought the film was incredible. However, she stated that she felt the film erased the lives of transwomen and made them invisible. In that moment my heart sank to the floor. While, on the one hand I was angry because I felt the critique was utterly baseless, I also felt responsible for making a transperson – my sister – feel invisible. While in that moment I was somewhat devastated, with distance and some perspective what I really feel is anger. The film, *against a trans narrative*, is explicitly about transmasculine experiences. Nowhere in the film's description does it mince words in this regard. The film is not about transwomen, period. This may seem harsh, and perhaps it is, but I should not be required when making a film about transmen to also make it about transwomen. And, my hope is that a transwoman can watch a film about transmen and not feel it makes her life or identity invisible.

This points back to the problem of representation, language, and media. She went to this film with the expectation that it would be in some way about her because the word *trans* is used in the title. We often expect or want one word to hold too many meanings and ultimately, when that word breaks open from the weight of our collective longings, we are disappointed and go off in search of another word we can destroy. Sometimes, when we find that someone else whose identity is not exactly like ours uses the same word to describe him or herself, we feel we are made invisible, our identity erased.

This is where identity politics get messy. If Thomas calls himself FTM and I do too but we both have radically different conceptions of what that means, who is awarded authenticity and thus *allowed* to claim this word for himself? Is it a matter of history? Should we attempt to un-surface the etymology of FTM (which probably isn't too difficult) and then award the authenticity trophy to the identity that claimed it first? Or do we acknowledge that words and communities are constantly in flux, that tearing down one member of the community to build yourself up is never useful, and never gets you anywhere in *the struggle*.

While I acknowledge that words have power and that many folks search long and hard for the right one to describe themselves, in the big picture it seems somewhat insignificant. My priorities are more along the lines of survival. I don't care so much about what someone calls me, or what to call myself if I cannot find gainful employment, food, housing and the other bare necessities. In the grand scheme of things I think we need allies, and I am willing to do the work of attempting to bridge those gaps in understanding so as to build a more united front. Do not mistake me, I am not saying we should all sit around and hold hands, that no one should be angry, that the stakes aren't high. The stakes are high, everyone should be angry, but this problem has plagued communities and movements for centuries, otherwise we wouldn't have essays titled, "Must identity movements self-destruct?"

It is unfortunate that so many people I would consider to be progressive, even radical, transgendered folks were calling for, or participated in, the attempted silencing of Thomas' voice. Considering that transgendered folks are so often thrown under the bus by the larger LGB(T) community, I was shocked to see them attempting to do the same to Thomas. While I was not personally part of it, I heard

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from Thomas himself and from someone who was supposedly on the call, that several of the larger transgender (and lesbian and gay) institutions called Thomas before he appeared on Oprah to try and stop him. Clearly, this didn't work. It even backfired as Thomas lamented the lack of support he found in the trans community while on Oprah. Some transgender advocates were concerned that Thomas' continual assertion of the *legality* of his manhood would spark a legislative battle to take away trans people's rights to legally alter their state-sanctioned sex. I acknowledge this as a very real concern.

I do not believe that the best way forward involves the censoring of certain people's voices. This is no different than the Human Rights Campaign saying, "Well, we're just going to cut you from ENDA right now, but don't worry trannies, you're still our brothers and sisters and once we've gained some power we'll come back for you." Bullshit. If the legislation does not include all of us, especially those that in many cases are the most marginalized, then I want no part in it. So, if the image of the trans community that some trans advocates are so concerned with regulating and constructing means silencing voices, then whatever rights we think we currently have are not stable. And the truth is, they're not. Any rights that trans folks (or other minorities for that matter) currently have can be overturned at any moment; I think most of us are acutely aware of this and we live in a constant state of fear because of it. While I fully understand the tenuous nature of the "rights" trans folks currently enjoy, I am not willing to chastise another trans person for telling their story, nor will I willingly partake in his censorship in order to stabilize the political ground on which I stand. If those laws are not strong enough to protect us both, while fully articulating our identities, then they are not good enough. We cannot resort to fighting each other simply because we cannot affectively fight the larger system.

We must find a way to secure legal rights for transgender people without jeopardizing our relationships with each other and without shunning certain members of our various trans communities. This does not mean that just because someone is a member of our respective communities that we should not confront them when hurtful or problematic things are said. But if people are merely articulating the terms of their own identities, then we must take caution in how we address our grievances.

For those of us in marginalized communities, representation of the individual and representation of the group are often confused. If a trans person ends up in the media they are not seen for themselves, but rather as an ambassador from the entire group. Within the confines of a system that disallows for individual expression – and a truly dissenting voice – it is no wonder we continue to see the same (mis)representations time and time again. I do not see myself reflected when hearing Thomas talk about his trans experience, but that's not his fault. The media wants him because he reinforces all of our culture's ideas about gender (there are only two), sexuality (straight is great), family (men and women get married and have kids) and class (middle class is the standard).

The ties that bind are fragile and often wholly imaginary. Just because I'm trans does not mean I have anything in common with the trans person next to me. In fact, I may disagree with every aspect of that person's lifestyle and their ideologies, but



I acknowledge that in some sense we are part of a larger community that I hope sees us both as equal members. This always brings me back to the larger question of community in general. What community do I belong to? Which, if any, of my "identities" holds primacy? Perhaps my most intense alliances or allegiances are not with other trans people, but are to all people that are committed to anti-racism and social and economic justice for all people.

I think it's important for us to disagree, to challenge each other and to always want more, but I wonder if we can do these things without so carelessly groping around for some idealized version of our reflection. There will always be something wrong with trans representations in the media. There is no such thing as a trans character or story that would not offend or misrepresent someone. Media-makers are not going to answer our prayers. Though I know, as a media-maker, I am always trying, and at least acknowledge that failure is inevitable and may be built into the system of representation itself. We, the audience, need to change our expectations. Perhaps we can agree that we will not expect one person, one film, one story to represent the vastly different, extremely complex and beautiful variety of our lives. And, that no matter how much we disagree or dis-identify with the version of trans being represented, we must not engage in practices that attempt to silence certain voices, in order that ours be heard.

#### Notes on contributor

Jules Roskam is a trans film-maker, artist, educator and long-time activist dedicated to creating work by, for, and about trans/queer communities. He is the director/producer of two feature films, *transparent* (2005) and *against a trans narrative* (2009). He is now completing *Transfeminism*, a documentary about four transgender women fighting for social and economic justice. Roskam is a Visiting Assistant Professor in Video Production at Hampshire College.

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