

Merrimack College

Merrimack ScholarWorks

Communication and Media Faculty Publications

Communication and Media

11-2013

Original Plumbing: Performing Gender Variance Through Relational Self-Determination

Raechel Tiffe

Merrimack College, tiffer@merrimack.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.merrimack.edu/com_facpub



Part of the [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#), and the [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Tiffe, R. (2013). Original Plumbing: Performing Gender Variance Through Relational Self-Determination. *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*, 9(4), 1-19.

Available at: https://scholarworks.merrimack.edu/com_facpub/1

This Article - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Communication and Media at Merrimack ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication and Media Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Merrimack ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@merrimack.edu.

Original Plumbing: Performing Gender Variance Through Relational Self-Determination

Raechel Tiffe

Abstract: *In 2009, Amos Mac and Rocco Kayiatos, two transgender men, created Original Plumbing (OP) magazine, in an effort to “[document] diversity within trans male lifestyles through photographic portraits, essays, personal narratives and interviews.” In this essay, I argue that OP becomes a platform from which to understand the relational performance of transmale life. The magazine provides a foundation for transmen to take ownership of self-determination by constructing identity through a non-heteronormative framework, made possible through the queer worldmaking practices of an exclusively FTM (female-to-male) space. Throughout this essay, I critique what the magazine elects to value as “diversity,” tackling necessary questions about the politics of class and race in the transmasculine community. Building on the important work of queer of color critique, I highlight the ways in which OP both does and does not provide an intersectional account of trans lives.*

Key words: relational performance, agentification, queer of color critique, transgender, *Original Plumbing* magazine

In 2009, Amos Mac and Rocco Kayiatos, two transgender men from San Francisco, created a “Trans Male Quarterly” called *Original Plumbing* (OP) magazine. According to their website, the publication seeks to “[document] diversity within trans male lifestyles through photographic portraits, essays, personal narratives and interviews.” In addition, OP’s creators tout it as “the premiere magazine dedicated to the sexuality and culture of FTM¹ trans guys” (“*About*” *Original Plumbing*, 2011). In the first issue of OP, Mac’s letter from the editor explains that the goal of OP is:

Raechel Tiffe (PhD, University of Minnesota) is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Communication Arts & Sciences department at Merrimack College. Her academic work has been published in *Cultural Studies*. Online, her writing can be seen on *In Media Res* (media-commons.futureofthebook.org), *Teaching Media* (teachingmedia.org), *In Our Words* (inourwordsblog.com). The author would like to thank Sara Poutinen, Melody Hoffmann, Logan Casey, Dana Schowalter, Sara Wolter, the blind reviewers, and Michael LeVan for their input on this piece.

¹ FTM stands for “female-to-male” and is a term transgender people who were born female but identify as male (or present as masculine), often use to identify. The acronym MTF refers to “male-to-female,” and is also a term of self-naming used by the transfeminine community.

to shoot true diversity in the FTM community; in size, age, body, surgery, hormone use and non-use, because it is our belief that surgery and hormones don't necessarily make the man...It's more than just that. Maybe it's an attitude, a swagger, a limp wrist or just an awareness of ones self. Needless to say, there is not just one way to be a trans man. ("Why Original Plumbing?", Issue #1)

Amos goes on to say that he "was tired of waiting around to see an *accurate representation* of the trans male community in magazine form" and so he set out to create "a magazine for trans guys, made by trans guys" (*OP* Issue #1; emphasis mine).



As of this writing, there were six issues of *OP*, including: The Bedroom Issue, The Hair Issue, The Health and Safer Sex Issue, The Workin' Stiff Issue, The Fashion Issue, and The Schooled Issue. Although I have never seen a statement that suggests a narrower demographic target than that of the "transmasculine community," the featured men in the magazine and the types of readers hailed by the magazine appear

young, “hip,” and probably vaguely politicized, at least insofar as most identify as “queer.”²

Based on the goal of the magazine described by the creators, I examine six issues of *OP* to argue that the publication becomes a space to perform self-definition and self-determination. In describing “accurate representation” as necessarily accomplished only through stories and photos that capture how “there is not just one way to be a trans man,” *OP* establishes trans identity as a performative site of struggle, one constantly negotiated through the various embodied modalities of diverse transmasculine lives. For Judith Butler, this effort is emblematic of more than just representation, and asserts that the ability to live an *intelligible* life is necessary as a matter of literal survival. Thus, the function of *OP* can be read as a politically charged demand for a non-heteronormative recognition of the trans male community.

I also describe how *OP* illustrates and expands on Jack Halberstam’s theory of “the transgender look” which suggests that we must recognize the “complex personhood” (73) of trans persons, and that “when we read transgender lives, complex and contradictory as they may seem, it is necessary to read for the life and not for the lie” (74). At its most subversive, this “look” provides a lens to read transgender through the inclusion of other transgender bodies. That is, instead of playing a transperson off a cisgender³ person, doubling or including other trans characters “remove[s] the nodal point of normativity” (78). Part of this trans-centered space requires that the trans community, rather than cisgender storytellers, bear witness to their *own* lives with and for and because of each other. This type of self-construction through relational gender performance, I argue, is evident in the *OP* project.

I further discuss how the publication complicates feminist debates about representation and sexual objectification, and suggest that *OP* offers us a new framework to understand more than how the gender-nonconforming population is represented, but how they are made intelligible through their self-made, consensual *agentification*. That is, rather than becoming objects of the heteronormative gaze, the transmale body becomes a subject; not objectified, but *agentified*, through the self-defined, consensual performative act of putting one’s self “out there.” Although I ground this process in the context of the erotic and sometimes pornographic content of the mag-

² This statement may seem too broad or unfair, but there is undeniably a certain subcultural element that is reflected from the majority of the creators, featured men, and readers. Using the term “queer” throughout the various issues is arguably a term that is necessarily rooted in a political understanding of sexuality. Tattoos and clothing choices consistently reflect a type of hipster subcultural style, and it is clear that *OP* is reaching out to those on not only the gender-margins, but also the margins of mainstream culture in general. Although beyond the scope of the paper, this tendency of queer culture to deviate from the ‘norm’ in ways that surpass sexuality and gender presentation would be worth exploring in terms of how queer worlds are constructed. For more, see *That’s Revolting: Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation*. (2008), edited by Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore.

³ Cisgender refers to a person who identifies with the sex organs they were born into. For example, a female-identified person that was designated a female sex at birth.

azine, I suggest that agentification can be applied more broadly to our daily interpersonal interactions when we offer performances of ourselves that are contingent on our relationships with other people.

Throughout this essay, I critique what the magazine elects to value as “diversity,” tackling necessary questions about the politics of class and race in the transmasculine community. Building on the important work of queer of color critique, I highlight the ways in which *OP* both does and does not provide an *intersectional* account of trans lives. In *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (2004), Roderick Ferguson explains queer of color critique as an analysis that “extends women of color feminism by investigating how intersecting racial, gender, and sexual practices antagonize and/or conspire with the normative investments of nation-states and capital” (4). Queer of color analysis becomes a useful tool for reading a self-described transgender text to determine how, if at all, it critically engages with questions of capital and class, and to see how scholars can engage with the transgender subject as subjects of knowledge rather than just identity. As numerous feminist and queer theorists and activists have made clear, acknowledging the *intersectionality* inherent in marginalized existences is necessary to overcoming any sort of struggle against oppression (see Crenshaw, 1990; Berger & Guidroz, 2009; Ferguson, 2004), and as Cathy Cohen (1997) notes, “the process of movement-building must be rooted not in our shared history or identity, but in our shared relationship to dominant power which normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges” (458).

First though, it is necessary to explain my positionality and relationship to *OP* magazine. As a cisgender scholar, I am quite aware of the risk I take in “using” a transgender piece of culture as my “object” of study. Below I will explain how I came to discover *OP* and how I hope to approach this project with a commitment to ethical transparency and to be self-reflexive about the ways in which my white cisgender positionality is complicit in maintaining a system of dominance that oppresses transgender people. In addition, I offer, with hesitancy, some personal information about myself in an effort to emphasize my underlying theory about *OP*: that we perform our genders not *for* others, but *because* of others.

Girls Who Like Boys Who Were Girls Who Like Girls

“I have desired this kind of woman, women who are men that are women, since I first came out as a lesbian and saw a butch. It was the first time in my sexual life that I understood the focus of my precise yearnings, felt my own longing answered, knew for certain that I required this kind of woman with a hunger that would not quiet down – knew that, with her, I could finally be bad.” –Amber Hollibaugh

I was 18 when I met my first butch lesbian, and so I was 18 when I first realized I might be attracted to women. She was about 5’5”, Chicana, with brown eyes you could get lost in for hours—like staring into two black cups of coffee, steaming up my face with *heat*. I saw her around campus, and about halfway through my freshman

year of college, she started coming to the anti-war group I participated in. She had the patch of a pop-punk band I liked sewn on her messenger bag, and when I told her, ‘*I like your patch,*’ and she looked up at me nervously, bumbling for words in a way that made me know she thought I was pretty...I was done for. It was as though, in that instant, my identity went from ‘feminine’ to ‘femme,’ from ‘straight’ to ‘queer.’ But it was only through that recognition from her queer-masculine gaze that I myself felt fully capable of being a queer female. It was only through my desire and her recognition that I felt most queerly intelligible.

I begin an essay about a transgender magazine with the story of my experience with a butch *not* to equate female masculinity with FTM transgender masculinity (in their respective various formations), but rather to emphasize how my gender-identity (femme) and my sexuality (queer) are contingent upon my relationships.⁴ And although I continued to identify as femme even while in relationships with cisgender men, I went through a similar experience of desire/recognition when I met a transman named Blake.⁵ When I *saw him see me*, I felt the same rush of queer-being take over my body.⁶

Falling in love with Blake also meant being privy to a world of hormone shots, bathroom predicaments, and pronoun mishaps.⁷ It meant getting hot from the low rumble of T⁸-laden murmur, or a newly defined pectoral muscle—things I knew were a result of a queer intentionality, and not hegemonic masculinity.⁹ I remember tracing the month-old scars that carved out Blake’s chest like two small smiles as he recounted his decision to transition; his story challenged essentialist narratives about transgender people being “born in the wrong body,” since for Blake, he didn’t want to be a guy until later in life. Falling in love with Blake meant being confronted with the “complex personhood”¹⁰ of a transgender life (and ordering a subscription to *OP*).

⁴ This is not to say that asexual people or people who are not in (sexual) relationships are not capable of possessing a gender-identity or sexuality, but rather that *all* our relationships, past and present, shape our understanding of ourselves. I continued to identify as femme and queer when I became involved with a straight cisgender male, but I may not have felt so attached to those terms or as developed in the politics that are attached to them had I not experienced the process of becoming through my past romances. I will expand more on this in the next section.

⁵ Name has been changed for privacy purposes.

⁶ Blake, like almost all of the men featured in *OP*, identifies as trans and queer—had he been stealth and identified only as a “man,” I may not have experienced the same attraction and queer-becoming.

⁷ These are very real experiences for most gender non-conforming people, not just those who identify explicitly as transgender.

⁸ “T” refers to “testosterone.”

⁹ Many have argued that transgender men *are* perpetuating problematic forms of hegemonic masculinity. Because most of these arguments end up being deeply transphobic, I choose not to engage with them at any length.

¹⁰ In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery Gordon (1997) writes, “Complex personhood means that people suffer graciously and selfishly too, get stuck in

Shortly after I felt comfortable identifying and consciously performing femme, I experienced what is in the queer community widely understood as the very real phenomenon of “femme invisibility.” Femme invisibility is the experience of not being read as gay, which queer feminine women experience on a daily basis. Femme invisibility results in often-unwanted attention by straight cisgender men, harassment, and sometimes being ignored by potential queer partners who assume we are straight. In response, femme women have joined together to find ways to make ourselves visible and to reclaim and de-stigmatize femininity. One example of exerting femme visibility is through “femme flagging.” This trend, which pays homage to the gay male hanky code,¹¹ encourages femme women to paint all but one nail a particular color, then “flag” by painting their index finger in a different shade that corresponds with a color-coded system. Although femmes may flag in hopes to attract a potential lover, it is more broadly used in hopes that a fellow queer might spot the coded nails in public and affirm the femme as family.¹² Thus, queer-becoming isn’t only about normative understandings of desire, but illustrates a broader queer understanding of desire that is about attraction through affirmation, from community.

I take this space to name my identity through multiple forms of desire for two reasons. First, my positionality as a transmasculine-loving femme explains my interest in and relationship to this project. Second, my narrative mirrors the mission of *OP*, and also reflects the ways in which identity is constructed through *relational* performance. In other words, how we ‘do’ our gender is contingent upon how others ‘do’ their gender toward us (and with us, beside us, and inside of us). In the magazine, each contributor explains their transgender identity through a variety of narrative, performative, and creative accounts, all of which are enabled through the relational foundation of the magazine. As I will further discuss below, the complexity, diversity, and partiality of these accounts illustrate the potentiality of self-naming and self-determination to be understood as a relational method for performing gender variance through a process I describe as “agentification.”

A Trans Account

Judith Butler (2005) argues that we can never give a truly full account of ourselves, but that this should not be seen as an ethical failure. She writes:

symptoms of their troubles, and also transform themselves...Complex personhood means that stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about their society’s problems are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward” (5).

¹¹ The hanky code refers to the practice of placing different colored bandanas in your back pocket to indicate a particular type of sexual preference. Some gay men use it to indicate top/bottom status and numerous other sexual activities.

¹² “Family” is a term used by people in the LGBTQ community to indicate that someone is also an LGBTQ person.

...my narrative begins in media res, when many things have already taken place to make me and my story possible in language. I am always recuperating, reconstructing, and I am left to fictionalize and fabulate origins I cannot know. In the making of the story, I create myself in new form, instituting a narrative 'I' that is superadded to the 'I' whose past life I seek to tell....My account of myself is partial, haunted by that for which I can devise no definitive story. (39-40)

For Butler, the fact that we are not isolated creatures means that our being, and our accounts of our being, cannot be fully realized without the acknowledgement of our relationship to an-other. Butler asserts, "the very being of the self is dependent...on the social dimension of normativity that governs the scene of recognition" (23).

OP can be read as a medium by which the trans community attempts to give an account of what it means to be a transmasculine person. However, the very composition of the magazine pre-requires a testament to the ways in which our identities are not possible without our relationships to the communities to which we belong. For *OP*, the focus on self *qua* community reflects what Butler asserts, but does so in a way that necessarily implicates affirmative responses. That is, although the individual trans lives documented on the pages of the magazine are certainly formed through the historicity of becoming in a transphobic culture, the accounts they self-construct in *OP* are formed only in relation to the fellow trans bodies in the publication, as well as the trans and allied/admiring readers.

The agency asserted in claiming the means by which the accounts of oneself are shaped in *OP* speaks directly to Halberstam's theory of the "transgender look." Halberstam states that the transgender look thwarts the heteronormative male gaze in one of three ways. One way is by initially representing the transgender character as their desired gender, and only showing later in the media text that the character is not cisgendered. Another way is by allowing the audience to look *with* the transgender character instead of at them. A final way is through the "ghosting" or "doubling" feature that juxtaposes the trans character either to a ghost or double of themselves or to other transgender characters (Halberstam, 2005, 78).¹³ *OP* takes on this last approach using a process of written and photographic storytelling, and would not have been created at all had Mac not been encouraged by transmen "all over the world" to create a space for portrayals of their lives.

Examples of Halberstam's theory can be seen more literally when Mac does photo shoots using more than one of the featured transmen at a time. Although most of the issues feature separate articles for each particular transman, some issues feature spreads with several of the transmen in pictures together. In the "Schooled" issue, we

¹³ Halberstam cites three films to illustrate these concepts, respectively. First, *The Crying Game's* (1992) transgender female character, Dil, is represented as a ciswoman throughout the first part of the film to both the audience and the characters. *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), in which audience members are told the story mostly through transgender character Brandon Teena's point of view. Finally, the film *By Hook or By Crook* (2001) provides viewers a world in which the gender-ambiguity of the characters is not part of the storyline.

see several of the models interacting in a classroom, as each took on the persona of what they envisioned to be a stereotypical high school boy (*OP* #6, 2011). In addition, the creators, Mac and Kayiatos, are often in conversation with one another both literally and conceptually. Mac's letter from the editor sometimes features a conversation with Kayiatos, and the photo spreads and articles are almost always a product of the partnership between the two. By making these choices, *OP* participates in a process of queer worldmaking that allows for "a new mode of envisioning gender mobility" (Halberstam, 2005, 79). The pages of *OP* immerse us in a queer-world, in which cis-gender people are rarely present.



Of course, *OP* is not suggesting that queer-worlds are always-already able to be created or accessed, and many of the articles speak to often ugly and violent experiences of being read and looked at in outside/non-queer spaces. Still, the pages of *OP* allow for the trans contributors' reflections on these experiences to act as a process of resistance. In the article "Paper & Plastic" (*OP* #4, 2010), Tristan Donovan writes about working at a grocery store, dealing with customers who are confused by his gender presentation. He starts off by explaining of one encounter, that, "The gaze is intense. She's staring, she does not even know what to make of me." However, he ends the story with a statement of defiance: "And, well, I truly don't care." Although in that encounter Donovan's identity was being constructed through a hostile, non-queer gaze, *OP* allows Donovan to reclaim that experience as a triumphant one, in

which he becomes the agent in the story, and in which his identity is defined not through the cisgender customer, but through his words.

Aimee Carillo Rowe (2005) makes a similar argument about the way our identities are formed in her theory of a “politics of relation.” In it she suggests that it is not always helpful to speak from a “politics of location,” as many standpoint theorists do, without acknowledging the relationships that allowed for one to speak from that position. She explains:

A politics of relation is not striving toward absolute alterity to the self, but rather to tip the concept of ‘subjectivity’ away from ‘individuality’ and in the direction of the inclination toward the other so that the ‘being’ is constituted not first through the ‘Self,’ but through its own longings to be with. Belonging precedes being. (17)

Both the form and content of *OP* reflect a commitment and necessary reliance of belonging to community to *be*. One example of this can be seen in the interview with Benji, a high school student who founded the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) at his school. When Mac asks if anyone in particular inspired Benji to come out as trans, Benji explains:

My biggest coming out was coming out to my school, it was one of the most terrifying experiences of my life, just due to myself and how afraid I was to do it. The only reason I was able to go through with it is because I had the support of my GSA and of the GSA Network. They helped me through and everything with my school went fine....Oh! And RuPaul and Jeffree Star! They both are two of my idols, and although they do not identify as transgender, I really respect how they express themselves. (37)

Benji’s explanation of needing the support of GSA to self-articulate as trans reflects Carillo Rowe’s theory of how the “Self” is constituted.

For a transgender person, language becomes a particularly powerful tool for self-definition and self-determination. Bernice L. Hausman (1995) suggests that a

true transsexual discourse would problematize gender by destabilizing the official transsexual history of the ‘wrong body’ and by introducing into discourse ‘disruptions of the old patterns of desire that the multiple dissonances of the transsexual body imply’ (citing Stone, 338).

This postmodern shift in self-describing enables the materiality of Butler’s notion of performing non-binary genders to come into fruition.

In addition, taking the role of self-naming and identifying allows the gender-variant community to reclaim agency from a society that has been attempting to take power away through discourses of pathology. As Jason Cromwell (1999) states, “Being trans-anything is a self-diagnosis....A new discourse is being created by those who articulate their transsubjectivity differently than medico-physiological discourses have allowed” (25). In response to the pathological categorization of the medical model, a

transgender movement based on self-determination has emerged. Echoing the demands of this movement, scholar and transgender activist Dean Spade (2003) writes, “I would like people to have the freedom to determine their own gender identity and expression and not be forced to declare such an identity involuntarily or pick between a narrow set of choices” (29). Trans people’s inability to self-identify results in egregious structural obstacles and a forced and harmful relationship to the medical industrial complex (Spade, 2003). Without the ability to name themselves, trans people have experienced problems getting proper identification, which leads to harassment at the airport, challenges with law enforcement, and, in some states, an inability to vote. Often times, the only way to get identification that matches one’s gender performance is to show proof of costly medical procedures.

In addition to gender non-conforming bodies, discourses of pathology have historically been projected upon bodies of color, and reclaiming trans-identity from the medical model is a distinct challenge for transpeople of color. As Ferguson (2004) notes, the hegemonic function of White Supremacy and heteronormativity are inter-related. He writes,

African American culture has historically been deemed contrary to the norms of heterosexuality and patriarchy. As its embodiment in whiteness attests, heteronormativity is not simply articulated through intergender relations, but also through the racialized body. (20-21)

There are some instances when *OP* addresses this explicitly. In the “Hair” issue, Asher O. Kolieboi writes a reflective piece titled “Tales of a Knotty Boi.” The story recounts how Kolieboi was harassed on the street by a “white, twenty-something, upper-middle class suburbanite” who continued to shout “Jamaica, Jamaica!” towards the writer. Kolieboi was confused, as he is not Jamaican, but Liberian-American. Kolieboi continues to reflect on more racist encounters he’s had as a transman of color. He explains that before beginning his “journey in gender fluidity, [he] embarked on a journey of racial self-discovery” learning about the African Diaspora and growing dreadlocks, in an attempt to change his “appearance to reflect [his] politics.” His hair, he suggests, “establishes [his] position as a radical afrocentric warrior, a visual representation of [his] resistance to the forced enslavement and colonization of black bodies.” Kolieboi concludes:

Since graduating from college in May, stories about ‘dread discrimination’ or people with dreadlocks being fired for having ‘unnatural hair’ have filled my inbox and driven me to consider cutting my hair. But I continue to return to a place of defiance and resistance of white normativity, both within transmasculine communities and society at large. (15)

Here, *OP*’s pages become a blatant tool for educating readers about white supremacy. Furthermore, this particular story highlights the intersections of race and gender iden-

tity, and encompasses Ferguson's call for a queer of color analysis that "[points] to the racialized, gendered, classed, and eroticized heterogeneity of the social" (143).

Although *OP* isn't challenging the *structures* that promote pathologized identity categories, it is providing a space for transgender-identified persons to explain the intersectional complexity of their trans identity to explore possibilities for self-expression beyond the gender binary. And as Butler (2004) remarks, "Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread" (p.29).

Blatant critiques of the intersection of oppressions are not plentiful, however, and in some instances, intersectionality disappears from the pages. For example, the editor's note from Mac in the "Workin' Stiff" issue describes how "[b]eing a person of trans experience can sometimes make the process of going for that well-deserved job a bit more daunting than it should be" (*OP*, Issue #4). He goes on to say that "transitioning at the workplace can be overwhelming!" Certainly, Mac's goals of sharing difficult work stories is an important one; but absent from the tales is any structural analysis of how violent transgender discrimination and exclusion are part of a larger problem of economic injustice. Featured in the issue are "six different trans men with diverse jobs: a baker, a stunt man, a businessman, a drag queen an activist, and a prolific writer." Although this list reflects the sometimes-unconventional means by which transmen are often forced to survive, nothing in the issue speaks to the systemic causes of workplace injustice and discrimination.¹⁴ Nor does the issue contextualize what it means for one of the featured (white) transman to have made it as a successful Market Development Manager, and another (black) transman to have worked countless working-class jobs.

The "Workin' Stiff" Issue of *OP* treats work as something that is not embedded in class, and seems to ignore the ways in which structural cissexism violently affects poor and working-class trans people. This can be seen in the questions Mac asks the transmen he interviews: he asks Simone the baker if he has "any advice for transmen who are having a tough time finding a job these days?"; asks drag-queen Adrian Dalton if he has "advice...[for] trans men who are scrimping and saving for their transition-related surgeries?"; and features businessman Seth List who provides advice lists for transmen, including "Essential pieces of clothing you should have for that pro-office job" (*Workin' Stiff*, #4). By asking for "advice," Mac inevitably perpetuates a "bootstrapist" notion of what it takes to succeed, rather than confronting the real, structural causes of transgender unemployment through *strategies*.

¹⁴ According to the 2009 National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Transgender Discrimination Survey, transgender people experience double the rate of unemployment compared to the rest of the population; 97% of those surveyed experienced harassment or mistreatment on the job; 47% experienced adverse job outcome such as being fired, not hired or denied a promotion; 15% of transgender people lived on \$10,000 or less; 19% have been or are homeless (para. 2, 2009).



My goal here is not to scold or judge *OP* (or any of the interviewees) as not living up to my own political agenda, especially since the creators of the magazine never explicitly proclaim their publication to be political. That being said, I think the responsibility of scholars, activists and *OP* readers who believe in the value of a queer of color analysis is to hold queer texts accountable for the messages they send and the connections they do or do not make to broader struggles for social change.

Outside of providing spaces for giving complex accounts, *OP* has the potential for creating a positive social shift in society's response to gender non-conforming bodies through its erotic and sometimes pornographic content. In the section that follows, I will explain how *OP*'s "disidentification" with pornography aides in fostering livable lives for the transmasculine community.

Representation, Objectification, and Agentification

When flipping through the pages of *OP*, the reader is boldly confronted with a mosaic of erotica: nude chests proudly displaying surgery scars, tattoos leading to glimpses of uncovered asses, phallic objects flirtatiously placed between the legs of naked models, and centerfold style spreads of transmen lounging on their beds all shamelessly greet the reader. Amidst the visual pleasures are often X-rated narratives or stories. In

“Jimmy Inside Me,” Alic Giannotti Shook writes a sexually explicit account, concluding in a graphic description of fellatio. He writes:

Cream seeps from the head of his dick and I lick it from the inside of my lips and off the sides of my cheeks. I brace my hands to grab it. I’m electric all over. I relish in the warmth of the cream that I spread like finger paint across my face (47).

Clearly, *OP* does not shy away from the risqué.



It is through this refusal to ignore the importance of the erotic that *OP* offers an important intervention into the discourse around representation and objectification. Thus, I want to go beyond the debate of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ pornographic representation to suggest that a disidentification with the porn industry can allow for a new mode of mediated sexual performance to emerge.

Jose Muñoz’s (1999) concept of disidentification allows us to see how *OP* simultaneously takes up a porn magazine form, while also resisting and challenging the sexism and heterosexism that are often attached to that genre. Muñoz describes three modes of dealing with dominant ideology: identification, counteridentification, and disidentification. He (1999) states:

Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. (11)

By featuring naked men in the magazine, *OP* is, on the one hand, suggesting that bodies can be made into objects for consumption. However, the fact that the naked bodies are transgender bodies challenges normative standards of what is and is not desirable. In addition, since each image is accompanied by a story or interview by or with the photographed man, no transman is represented without his own words to accompany his visual presence. Furthermore, the concept of the heteronormative “male gaze” is turned on its head when the magazine so clearly embodies what could be more accurately described as a “transgender look.” This shift requires an agency on behalf of the subject of the photo and also acknowledgement from the reader that the body is intelligible. This process, far from being oppressive or degrading, actually enables the process of what Butler describes as making a life “livable.”

In her article on a Toronto Women’s Bathhouse, Davina Cooper (2007) argues that while sexual pleasure may not be largely understood as a “basic survival need,” that it must be understood as a form of care, albeit “nonnormative” care. Certainly *OP* can be read as a publication that reflects a queer/feminist ethics of care, particularly when reading the imagery of desirable transmen as a necessary component to creating a livable life.

All of the *OP* models consent to being photographed and interviewed, and although sex workers have been featured in the issues, *OP* itself is not a magazine set up to hire sex work industry labor, but rather feature transmen from any occupation or background. It promotes an ethos of “sex-positivity” that proclaims an unapologetic insistence on being seen as a sexual being. Sex-positive activist and educator Charlie Glickman (2000) offers a definition of sex-positivity:

One common definition of sex-positivity is that it's the belief that sex is good...However, it can be more useful to reframe our definition of sex-positivity from 'sex is a positive thing' to 'working towards a more positive relationship with sex.' (n.p.)

Mac and Kaiyatos’ desire to help the transcommunity and its admirers work “towards a more positive relationship with sex” is evident throughout all the issues, but is made especially clear in their “Safer Sex” issue. This issue, according to the editor, sought “to open a dialog about the effects of testosterone on the body and provides readers with herbal remedies and treatments as well as steamy accounts of (safer) trans sex” (*OP*, Issue #3). Consistently showing transmen as sexual men—often done by sharing stories of being desired, sometimes featuring partners who confirm just how desirable they are—helps affirm transmasculine being.

Admittedly, this affirmation is not uncomplicated, particularly for transmen of color who are—as people of color, whether they are read as male or female—always

already subject to a racist, commodifying eroticization. Bell hooks (1992) describes this phenomenon as “eating the other.” She writes

Certainly from the standpoint of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the hope is that desires for the primitive or fantasies about the Other can be continually exploited, and that such exploitation will occur in a manner that reinscribes and maintains the *status quo*. (p. 425)

Although the magazine does feature transmen of color to be consumed, in challenging traditional conceptions of what is and isn’t desirable, *OP* does *not* seek to maintain the status quo. In addition, trans bodies of color are on display alongside white bodies, which are also offered up for consumption. Still, the historical reality of the objectification of Black and Brown bodies cannot be separated from the images in the magazine.

However, hooks does not conclude that the answer lies in demanding that white people stop desiring people of color. On the contrary, hooks (1992) contends the goal should be to disentangle desire from a state of taboo.

Within a context where desire for contact with those are different or deemed Other is not considered bad, politically incorrect, or wrong-minded, we can begin to conceptualize and identify ways that desire informs our political choices and affiliations. Acknowledging ways the desire for pleasure, and that includes erotic longings, informs our politics, our understanding of difference, we may know better how desire disrupts, subverts, and makes resistance possible. (438)

OP works to create that context—although not explicitly in regards to race, certainly in regards to “Otherness.” And, as I illustrated above with my own story of becoming intelligible through desire, the publication inspires a type of engagement with desire that is absolutely connected to politics. This politicized desire relies on both consent from the subject, and also an intentional refusal to assimilate into a heteronormative model of consumption.

I argue that this process of going from un-critical objectification to consensual, critical, disidentified objectification can be better understood as a form of what I am describing as “agentification.” I use this term to describe the queer, sex-positive process of taking agency over the practice of being objectified. It suggests that more than consenting to being the object of the gaze, that the object becomes agent through *inviting* the gaze. The models in *OP* are asking and inviting readers to view them as desirable sexual objects in a way that resists normative modes of pornographic modeling and consumption.

Similarly, Susan Pelle (2010) discusses the ways audiences respond to queer, Asian-American stand-up comic, Margaret Cho. Pelle suggests that non-normative bodies marked by differences through race, class, size, or sexuality can engage in practices of resistance through emphasizing those differences rather than shying away from them. Like *OP*, Cho emphasizes her sexuality in explicit and intentional ways.

Responses to Cho's stand-up routines have ranged from racist, sexist, and heterosexual, to "adamant declarations that Cho is dangerously and irresponsibly sexualizing and othering herself, and, as a result, all Asian and Asian American women" (27). Of the latter, Pelle writes,

Cho is much much more clever, strategic, and honest than hysterical and one-dimensional critiques allow, [and] she is doing much more than simply repudiating such representations. As a way to complicate [these declarations]...Cho borrows from the hypersexualized stereotypes and recuperates, subverts and redeploys them for her own "erotic and self-affirming" pleasures. (27)

Pelle asserts that Cho's performances are not about being read or understood as "normative," but rather "her movements are about surviving, negotiating, and even rebelling against hegemonic culture" (32).

Cho, like the transgender people featured in *OP*, ostensibly exploits her body through an objectifying medium. However, Pelle (2010) suggests that when non-normative bodies take ownership of this process, they create an opportunity to shift power away from an oppressively consumptive gaze. Instead, Cho and the models in *OP* present a sexualized version of self that is oppositional not only because it provides visibility of non-normative bodies, but also because the visibility being offered is *self-determined* and, I would argue, affirmed through queer audience/community.

Of course, even when these performances are intended for the project of queer worldmaking, they are still not impervious to what Dustin Bradley Goltz and Jason Zingsheim (2010) describe as

the complex ways that discourse frames and constrains queer performance practices, the recuperation and foreclosure of queer imaginaries, and the more general ways that politicized performance practices are negotiated and tempered through differing audience positionalities. (291)

That is, just because marginal people assert themselves as empowered doesn't mean they will be recognized as such by the rest of society. Individual resistance and oppositional gestures do not necessarily challenge structural systems of oppression.

How, after all, can pornographic content be deemed to have radical-potential if it is still a product of capitalism? *OP* offers a rare caveat to this question; Mac demonstrates an economic intentionality that mirrors the relational underpinnings of the magazine by using only queer companies for advertisements. The unique political economy of the magazine—owned and produced by transmen, funded through advertisers that support independent queer and trans businesses—does not radically transform exploitative capitalist means of production, but it does nuance the relationship between owner, producer, and consumer. To dismiss this nuance would be to ignore how this particular form queer performance provides an example of "a disidentification that enables politics" (Muñoz, 9).

Conclusion

"I see you."—one queer, to another

When I say I *am* a queer femme what I am really saying is that I *perform* queer femme. This performance is not for the straight world, nor is it *for* the queer-world—it is *because of* my queer-world. Yes, the fundamental project of most valuable political work is the fight for self-determination, but that doesn't mean *solo*-determination. The struggle for self-determination is not an isolated affair—it is a community project. *OP* reminds us that one can't "go it alone" because our performances (and thus also our political projects) are contingent upon our relationships.

In an interview with the Social Networking site TransQueer Nation (TQN), Mac says he is proud and surprised by the positive response to *OP* he has received. He is happy to see that

OP is giving transmen a space to be highlighted and appreciated by giving us all a soapbox to talk about issues we feel are relevant, and also it's just so important to be more visible and acknowledge that we exist and we're all out there and that we all have different stories. (TransQueer Nation, 2010)

Mac's response speaks to the myriad of ways that this publication provides a space of queer potentiality to burgeon in struggle against a heteronormative, transphobic society. In his statement he reminds us that the magazine is not only about trans subjects, but is for them and by them. It is a forum for storytelling and thus also identity-construction, on their own terms, and through mutually constituted relationships—with other transmen in the magazine and with the audience.

In order to determine if mediated representations of gender performativity can work to be a tool of political struggle we must ask whether or not the cultural representations of minoritarian subjects reflect the process of agentification. Agentification requires not only a performance of self-determination, but also a relational platform from which to perform upon and within. That the transmasculine subjects of *OP* are illustrative of agentification has everything to do with the magazine's intentional community—a queer-world that rejects a heteronormative gaze and replaces it with an affirming "transgender look." More than just affirming, agentification invites a *desiring* look that disidentifies with normative modes of erotic consumption.

In addition, we must consider whether or not mediated representations of transgender people become "subjects of knowledge" (rather than objects of consumption) that force us to examine broader societal relations of power. This too can be explained more broadly through the lens of performance: how do our self-constructions of self *qua* community work to challenge injustice? If they do not, how might we use relational performance to enable resistance? The transgender body has long been objectified, but transgender people have resisted that for just as long. They have performed an identity that is fully realized through their resistant political com-

munity. *OP* is one of the few examples of media production that participates in the process of a relational performance of self-determination and dissent. Muñoz reminds us that part of queer worldmaking is to “dream and enact new and better pleasure, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds” (1). Although *OP* does indeed create new worlds, it does so within the oppressive confines of the current system. In order to work against those forces, we must continue to lend a critical eye to projects like these that are so rife with potentiality.

Works Cited

- Butler, Judith. (2005). *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Butler, Judith. (2004). *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge.
- Carrillo Rowe, Aimee. (2005). Be longing: Toward a feminist politics of relation. *NWSA Journal*, 17, (2), 15-45.
- Cohen, C. (1997). Punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens: The radical potential of queer politics? *GLQ* (3).
- Cooper, D. (2007). 'Well, you go there to get off!' Visiting feminist care ethics through a women's bathhouse. *Feminist Theory*, (8) 3.
- Cromwell, Jason. (1999). *Transmen&FTMs: Identities, bodies, genders & sexualities*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Duggan, L. (2003). *The twilight of equality? Neoliberalism, cultural politics, and the attack on democracy*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Ferguson, Roderick. (2004). *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Glickman, C. (2000). The language of sex-positivity. *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality*, 21 (3).
- Goltz, D.B.; Zingsheim, J. (2010). It's not a wedding, it's a Gayla: Queer resistance and normative recuperation. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 30(3).
- Halberstam, Judith. (2005). *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press.
- Hausman, Bernice L. (1995). *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hooks, bell. (1992). *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press.
- Krupat, Kitty & McCreery, Patrick. (2001). *Out at Work: Building a Gay Labor Alliance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mac, Amos; Kayiatos, Rocco, (Eds.). (2009-2011). *Original Plumbing Magazine*. Issues 1-6.
- Muñoz, Jose Esteban. (1999). *Disidentifications: Queers of color and the performance of politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Muñoz, Jose Esteban. (2009). *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: NYU Press.
- Pelle, S. (2010). The 'grotesque' pussy: 'Transformation shame' in Margaret Cho's stand-up performances. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 30 (1).
- Prosser, Jay. (1998). *Second Skins*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Raffo, S., ed. (1997). *Queerly Classed: Gay Men and Lesbians Write About Class*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- Rubin, H. (2003). Self-made men: Identity and embodiment among transsexual men. Venderbilt University Press.
- Spade, Dean. (2011). About purportedly gendered body parts. *Dean Spade*. Retrieved from <http://www.deanspade.net/2011/02/03/about-purportedly-gendered-body-parts/>
- Spade, Dean. (2003). Resisting medicine, re/modeling gender. *Berkeley Women's Law Journal*.
- Stryker, Susan. (2008). Transgender history, homonormativity and disciplinarity. *Radical History Review*, 100.
- TransQueer Nation. (2010). TQ Nation Exclusive Interview: Amos Mac. Retrieved from <http://tqnation.wordpress.com/2010/04/13/tq-nation-exclusive-interview-amos-mac/>
- Wolf, S. (2009). *Sexuality and socialism: History, politics and the theory of LGBT liberation*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>; or, (b) send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.