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Learning Empowerment, Resistance and Female Identity Development from Popular Television: Trans-women Tell Stories of Trans-formation

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Abstract: This paper explores how and why three British trans-women, who were biologically male when they watched *The Avengers* in 1962-1964, engaged in self-directed learning while modeling part of their new female identity on the character of Dr. Cathy Gale.

You see, as a male, I looked like a music teacher—I thought as a woman, I'd look like a female music teacher. But I didn't; I looked like a woman army officer . . . , and it was at this point that I started looking around for models. (Astrid, research participant)

One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one. (Simone de Beauvoir)

Background and Happenstance

Hill (2000) asserts that male to female (MTF) transsexuals utilize numerous self-directed learning projects as “a rite of passage into female adulthood.” He calls for “direct action” by the adult education community and locates transexuality as an “under-investigated” site of social activism and adult meaning-making. This paper is part of a larger study exploring an unusually strong television character’s impact on women viewers’ feminist identity development (Wright, 2006). During that investigation, the call for participants was answered by three trans-women (MTF transsexuals) who wanted to share their stories. It became evident that the character influenced not only biologically-born women to become empowered feminists, but she also impacted biologically-born males who later became trans-women.

Before the advent of second-wave feminism in the West, Britons had their own *féministe mystérieuse* appearing weekly on their television sets in the character of Dr. Catherine Gale in the 1962-64 spy drama, *The Avengers*. The first few scripts had already been written for two male leads when Honor Blackman replaced one of them. Due to budget constraints, she played the part with a name change as the only revision (Miller, 1997; Soter, 2002). When the writers finally began writing new scripts for a female lead, Blackman was unhappy with the result. The character of Cathy Gale had by then been established with attributes that the male writers—and early 1960s British culture—considered masculine. With the support of her co-star, Patrick Macnee, and the producer, Leonard White, she told the scriptwriters to “write it for a man and I’ll play it as a woman,” which they did (Miller, 1997; Rogers, 1989; Soter, 2002). Blackman, as Cathy Gale, deliberately inverted the gender norms of early 1960s cultural discourse by reading and acting a part written for a man. Biologically-sexed males, whose core gender identity was female, were among those drawn to this popular, gender-bending TV character.

Theoretical Framework and Related Literature

According to Mezirow (2000, p. 20), “Imagination is central to understanding the unknown; it is the way we examine alternative interpretations of our experience by ‘trying on’ another’s point of view.” Television allows viewers to imagine themselves as someone different. The three self-directed learning projects discussed here were literally *transformational*. Each of the three trans-women described the stages of their transformation in terms almost identical to

Mezirow's (1991) ten phases of transformational learning—from the disorienting dilemma of realizing that they were transgendered, to their reintegration into society and work based on their “new perspectives” as women. Agger (1992, p. 122) asserts that, in popular media, “gender texts teach both women and men how to be gendered.” And Tisdell and Thompson point out that, “the entertainment media teach us something about ourselves as we map new meanings onto our own experience based on what we see. . .” (2005, p. 425). Not surprisingly, their investigation revealed that gay, lesbian, or bisexual (GLB) television viewers preferred programs with GLB characters (p. 429).

However, for TV audiences in 1962, there was little, if any, diversity in the portrayal of dichotomous, heterosexual gender roles. Hence, Honor Blackman's strident construction of Cathy Gale, a stunningly beautiful woman who could best male opponents both mentally and physically, had a distinct attraction for viewers whose gender identities were not reflected in the rigidly dichotomous gender roles modeled by most television characters of the era. Jarvis emphasizes that “popular culture can push ideas to their limits, escape the literal, and give concrete and dramatic form to issues” (2005, p. 12). The character of Cathy Gale gave concrete and dramatic form to the issue of gender diversity.

“Big D” Discourse and Cult TV

The scripts and action, combined with the audience's reception of *The Avengers* may be viewed as *Discourses*. The script—the words and actions on the screen—according to Gee (1999, p. 7) is “little d” discourse. But “when ‘little d’ discourse (language-in-use) is melded integrally with non-language ‘stuff’ [action, plot, cultural environment] to enact specific identities and activities, then ‘big D’ Discourses are involved” (Gee, 1999, p. 9). The non-language “stuff” is what happens in the space between television programs and viewers' responses. Foucault (1979, p. 101) asserts, “Discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy.” According to Foucault, sexuality is created through discourses (medical, psychiatric, social, legal, religious, cultural etc.) that label both people and acts.

For most Westerners, television is a significant part of both cultural and social discourses. The average U.S. citizen watches 4 hours of TV each day, the equivalent of 2 months of 24-hour-a-day viewing each year. By age 65, the average American has spent a full 9 years watching TV (Herr, 2001). The messages we absorb from the programs we choose to watch become part of our subjective selves. Sexual discourses operate at individual, cultural and political levels through popular images of gender roles. Unfortunately, the hegemonic powers that create these discourses have little tolerance for ambiguity now and had much less 45 years ago. In the 1962-64 episodes of *The Avengers*, traditional gender roles were inverted by the characters of Cathy Gale and John Steed. She was the more powerful character. Because there had not previously been images of tough, intelligent, accomplished women who exhibited traditionally male traits—physical strength, success, decisiveness, aggressiveness, self-confidence, acumen, and worldliness, to name a few—non-heterosexual, heterosexual, and transgendered viewers alike recognized the power of the Discourse between Cathy Gale and her audience. This Discourse thwarted the dominant political, cultural, and binary concept of gender.

Research Design

Because my purpose was to interview women who were influenced by the character of Cathy Gale, qualitative methods best suited this research. I advertised on the web at fansites like *The Avengers Forever* (<http://theavengers.tv/forever/dissertation.htm>), at conferences in the UK,

and by word-of-mouth for women upon whom the character had made a strong impression. My search snowballed and I was contacted by a number of biologically-born women and, serendipitously, by three trans-women who had undergone surgery in the 1970s and 1980s. I also collected dozens of documents—scripts, fanzines, magazines with reviews and interviews—for content analysis. These documents, an interview with Honor Blackman herself, and interviews with two scriptwriters, helped contextualize and inform my analysis of the women’s stories. Using this information and the categories that emerged, I searched for similar—or dissimilar—threads in participants’ responses.

The There and Then--Context

In my interview with Honor Blackman in July, 2006, I asked for anecdotes about meeting viewers whom she might have influenced. Her immediate response was, “I used to have lesbian fans.” She elaborated, “I used to have lesbians write to me. I had one woman who truly loved me, and it became quite frightening because she lived at the flats very close to us and she’d drop notes under the door.” Some fans became obsessed: “I had one—one lesbian fan, we found her in our basement by the boiler!” The character, according to Blackman, seemed to have an intense attraction for lesbians. It is perhaps not surprising, given the June Cleaver types that saturated 1960s television, that the confident, lovely, leather-clad Gale held wide appeal.

She also threatened those viewers who clung to the cultural myth of the “naturalness” of rigid, heterosexual gender stereotypes. Blackman recalled, “Quite a few men, when they’d had a few drinks, would try and call me out for a fight . . . and then they liked to try to mock me, because I really unnerved them.” Jon Manchip White, the scriptwriter for the episode, “Propellant 23”, which aired early in 1962, confirmed her perception. He still thinks of Blackman as “a formidable female. She didn’t have any charm.” In an interview conducted in 2005, he described Blackman as “rather a big woman and rather awkward. . . She didn’t look very feminine.” I was intrigued by the way his memory of the character as physical and aggressive had shaped his memory of the physicality of the actor who played her. She is neither big, nor awkward. Patrick Macnee, her *Avengers* co-star, has often said, “Honor Blackman is the most beautiful woman in the world” (Murray, 1998, p. 22). She is, after all, *Pussy Galore* in *Goldfinger*. Male responses to Cathy Gale support Butler’s claim that, “The various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts there would be no gender at all. . . . Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (1990, p. 140). For Butler, all gender is “performative.” Blackman’s weekly performance as a fiercely humanitarian woman with a Ph.D., a black belt in judo, and an expertise with firearms was a “stylized repetition of acts” that sent a confusing gender message to some viewers in an era of severe compulsory heterosexuality. All the women I interviewed, whether born or trans, unanimously agreed that Blackman—and Cathy Gale—was, and still is, strikingly beautiful, extremely feminine, delightfully sexy, and the sheer embodiment of charm.

The Here and Now--Findings

The similarities between the trans-women’s stories and the stories of non-transsexuals were striking. Their initial answers to the questions I asked were similar; the explanations that followed were often mirror opposites. For example, when asked why Cathy Gale influenced them, all said that they wanted to be like her. But it became evident as they elaborated, that the women-born-women wanted to acquire her power and assertiveness, and the trans-women wanted to learn how to exhibit her feminine grace and style.

Astrid is a trans-woman who is not out. In fact, when asked to select her pseudonym, her first choice was, “Low Profile.” She is in what Conway (2003) terms deep stealth mode. She is “passing” as a woman-born-woman. Astrid has,

worked hard during [her] early post-transition years to refine all aspects of presentation and behaviour that affect [her] passability. This involves . . . many compromises and tradeoffs while searching for a consistent persona and image that fits well with [her] physical presence. (Conway, 2003, p. 6)

With her 5’6” height and delicate frame, Astrid has worked hard to pass and, indeed, she has been successful. Her carefully planned, developed and enacted gender identity was fine-tuned throughout the transition process. Her efforts illustrate Foucault’s (1988) practice of self-invention by viewing the self/subject as a work of art that can be constructed to resist the dominant hegemony. As an administrator “in charge of a large male workforce,” Astrid needed a female role model from whom she could learn how to not “default into male mode when [she] needed to assert [herself].” She explained that the formal instruction she received during transition and post-op “was essentially to teach men how to look and act and sound like women. Not to teach men to *be* women.” Learning to *be* a woman was a self-directed learning project for which she needed a model. She chose Cathy Gale because she was the only female she knew who “was a full protagonist in what she was doing, rather than someone who reacts.” She saw Cathy as very feminine—but “commanding when she needed to be.” Having grown up biologically male, she had been trained to be “a full protagonist.” Using Cathy Gale as a role model, she taught herself how to be herself and how to *be* a woman.

China, on the other hand, is fully and flamboyantly *out*. She makes a comfortable living by sharing her experiences. While sipping tea in the tasteful living room of her small flat, enjoying a stunning view of the sea, we discussed Cathy Gale. China, I believe, could certainly pass if she chose to. She is a lovely woman with an athletic, but not necessarily masculine, build. As Conway (2003) points out, “people are generally more understanding and forgiving of a transitioner who looks really good. You can almost read folks’ minds as they think, ‘I guess you had to become a woman if you look like that!’” China might fall into that category. With a vivacious charm and infectious smile, she told me, “You see, I *am* Cathy Gale.”

China and her partner conduct seminars for biologically-born women on developing an empowered female identity, or *empowered feminine essence*, as she calls it. She bases the training on what she has learned living as both a man and a woman. Like Astrid, China recognizes that women are often not taught to be the *protagonists in their own lives*. China explained:

Funnily enough, when I was transitioning, one of my fears was that I’d turn into the wimpy little woman—the little washer. And what’s happened is, you know, the woman I’ve become is more like Cathy Gale than anything else. I resonate with the character. I do. . . because I’m out there—and I’m dangerous. . . . People find me quite scary—men find me scary. It’s like her. . . . It’s about edge—that fearless edge. Being trans is very interesting, because you create your own persona. I created myself to be her.

She found that being like Cathy was empowering and she felt that she could use her self-directed learning project—the creation of her feminine *self* to have that “fearless edge”—to teach women-born-women self-empowerment: “You see, nobody told me that I was supposed to be powerless. I just made myself up according to how I felt and how I felt was remarkably like Cathy Gale.” She elaborated:

One day, at work, this Mrs. _____, she said to me, “Don’t you find you’ve lost a lot of power by doing this?” I said, “Oddly enough, I’ve gained it.” I’d distinctly gained power . . . women grow up as girls, and go through the girl system, you know? You go to girl school and do all these girl things. I think there are a lot of subtle messages in your teachings—that sort of hesitation and inferiority and powerlessness. Now I, on the other hand, I’m a modern-day Aphrodite; I was born fully formed, you know, as an adult woman. . . . I think I’ve been given some special insight into the world, you know? I do. I mean, I’m absolutely thrilled. This is what I teach.

She and her partner have been hired by some of the biggest companies in the UK to train female officers and executives. China, essentially, trains other women to be like Cathy Gale.

In sharp contrast to the other two, **Chris**’s story is tragic and heartbreaking. Briefly, she was born with Klinefelter’s Syndrome 2 (XXXY) and intersexed. Raised as a girl until age five, she was at that time surgically given the appearance of male-only genitalia. This led to decades of suffering the negative effects of testosterone injections as well as an internal gender conflict. She is certain that she was born “chemically female.” When she, as an adult in her 50s, transitioned *back* to female, the years of testosterone therapy made it difficult. Like Astrid, she wants to pass as female, but has difficulty because of her physical stature. She has often been “clocked” or publicly outed.

Chris, too, modeled herself on Cathy Gale. Specifically, she remembered Cathy’s physical strength (although Honor Blackman is a small woman) and her aggressiveness and felt, like Astrid, that there was no one else from whom she could (re)learn to “walk as a girl who has been made strong.” She felt that her memories were not enough for her study. She bought VHS tapes of some Cathy Gale *Avengers* and used them for self-directed instruction on, “how to walk, how to enter a room—head held high, how to look men in the eye without triggering a testosterone match.” She also tried to match the tenor of Honor Blackman’s voice. “If I had been able to remain the girl I was born as,” she told me with a wry, sad smile, “I think I would have been very much like Cathy. As it is, I try my best to be a passable imitation.”

Chris is very active in the trans community and in transfeminist groups in the UK. She runs a support group for *trannies* and sometimes takes runaway MTF transgendered teens into her home. They often have nowhere to go because their families have rejected them. She shares her *Avengers* tapes with those guests and tells them, “You’ll probably never walk like Princess Di but, if you watch these and practice, you can learn to be *that* kind of woman.” She helps them learn how to dress and speak: “Even today, Cathy Gale’s style is, in some respects, fashionable. The boots, for instance—I keep telling my girls that the feet and ankles can get you clocked. See how great you can look in leather boots?”

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

Armstrong (2000) asserts that, “the use of popular culture in creating learning cultures needs a more thorough examination.” And transexuality is a “site of learning in adulthood” (Hill, 2000) that warrants further investigation. The serendipitous nature of this response to a larger study of popular culture as a portal of adult learning indicates that both are correct. Adults learn from popular culture in a variety of ways—sometimes ways we cannot predict. Armstrong (2000) further proposes that “far from being about passive non-learning, television viewing can have tremendous potential for stimulating critical commentary and raising awareness of a wide range of issues, not least through popular cultural programs.” Tisdell and Thompson (2005) note that most research on popular culture and education has “focused on youth as consumers of

popular culture and/or how adolescents of different cultural groups draw on popular culture in constructing their identities.” As critical adult educators, we must investigate the effects of popular culture on adults and the potentialities of popular culture with respect to adult education. We should critically engage with it and reflect on it, in order to recognize opportunities for utilizing pop culture to more effectively bring about both student learning and social change.

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