

The Meaning of the Deletion of the Black Victim in “Boys Don't Cry”

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Abstract

Boys Don't Cry (1999), directed by Kimberly Peirce and starring Hilary Swank, tells the story of Brandon Teena, who was born female but feels uncomfortable with his gender and tries to become a man. The film is based on the true story of Brandon Teena. He goes to a town where no one knows him and is once accepted as a man by the local youth, but he is eventually discovered to be a woman and raped and murdered by his male friends. This film is very important in that it brought the previously little-known concept of transgenderism to the public's attention. However, although only Brandon and his friend Candace, who let Brandon stay at her house, are depicted as being killed in the film, in fact, apart from Brandon and Lisa Lambert (portrayed as Candace in the film), the other individual named Phillip DeVine, a young Black man who was present at Lisa's house that day, was also killed. Despite this, Phillip DeVine does not appear in *Boys Don't Cry*. Here, I will examine Aphrodite Jones' *All She Wanted* and several newspaper articles that were written based on careful coverage of the case, to find out more about Phillip DeVine, who was erased from *Boys Don't Cry*. Furthermore, by analyzing why Peirce did not include DeVine, who is Black, in the film, I will also investigate Peirce's subconscious mind toward Black people, which underlies the psychology behind the exclusion of DeVine.

Keywords: *Boys Don't Cry*, Kimberly Peirce, Phillip DeVine, Brandon Teena

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Introduction

Boys Don't Cry (1999), directed by Kimberly Peirce and starring Hilary Swank, is based on the true story of Brandon Teena, a transgender man who was born female but feels uncomfortable with his gender and tries to become a man. He was once accepted as a man by the local young people but was eventually discovered to be a woman and raped and murdered by his male friends. This film is very important in that it brought the previously little-known concept of transgenderism to the public's attention.

However, in the film, only Brandon and his friend Candace, who was staying with Brandon at his house, are killed. In fact, in addition to Brandon and Lisa Lambert (Candace in the film), a young black man named Phillip DeVine, who was at Lisa's house that day with Brandon, was also killed. Despite this, Phillip DeVine does not appear in *Boys Don't Cry*. By clarifying what kind of person DeVine actually was and considering the significance of why Peirce did not include him in the film, I will investigate the racist mindset of director Peirce behind the exclusion of the Black victim in *Boys Don't Cry* and the problems of American society itself that give rise to such a mindset.

Who is Phillip DeVine?

David M. Jones (2010) states that “DeVine's life story is entirely absent from *Boys Don't Cry*, a film that has since become a master text among mass media efforts to reconstruct the events and deeper significance surrounding the Humboldt murders” (p. 175). As Jones states, in *Boys Don't Cry*, only Brandon Teena and Candace (the actual victim was Lisa Lambert) are murdered by John Lotter and Tom Nissen, and the other victim, Phillip DeVine, a Black man, does not appear. Here, before considering why Phillip DeVine is excluded from *Boys Don't Cry*, I will examine what kind of person Phillip DeVine was and what circumstances led him to be involved in the murders.

John Gregory Dunne (1997), a reporter for *The New Yorker*, noted that “Phillip DeVine was physically handicapped, with only a stump for a right leg, and a prosthetic device that attached below the knee.” According to Dunne, Phillip's physical disabilities at birth specifically included the following:

Phillip DeVine's life was not without hardship of its own. Because of a defective prescription drug that his mother had taken during pregnancy, he was born two months premature, with a damaged heart, crossed eyes, lungs that were permanently scarred, and a right leg that ended at the knee. In spite of his physical torment, he had grown into a strapping youth, so agile on his prosthetic leg that he was able to compete vigorously in sandlot sports.

Furthermore, according to Aphrodite Jones (1996), who did extensive research on Brandon Teena and was the first to publish a book on the Humboldt case, Phillip's mother, Phyllis, was a devotee of transcendental meditation (TM) and would sometimes leave Phillip and his brother behind while she went to TM meetings. Eventually, Phyllis and her husband Paul divorced and each remarried; Phillip and his brother were taken in by his father, and Jones describes Phillip thereafter as follows:

In 1984, Phillip moved to Maryland with his dad. Paul had gotten divorced again and was starting life over, having decided it best to live near his sister Denise. Denise had

become a successful entrepreneur in leasing and selling computers, and Paul needed her help in raising Phillip. As it turned out, Denis was a tremendous force in Phillip's life. She dressed him in the finest clothes, sent the boy to private schools, had people working with his learning disabilities, and was able to give Phillip a strong sense of self. (p. 199)

Thus, Phillip was given an education and a stable life by his aunt, but when he got tired of living with her in Maryland, he contacted his mother and lived with her in California for a while. However, he got tired of that too and decided to go to Job Corps in Denison, Iowa.

What can be said about Phillip up to this point is that despite his mother's excessive devotion to religion, his parents' divorce, and, above all, his physical disability that he is missing his right leg from the knee down, he managed to live a life of his own without committing a crime. The reason why Phillip's life started to go out of order was when he met Leslie Tisdel, the sister of Lana Tisdel, the girlfriend of Brandon Teena, the main character in *Boys Don't Cry*.

The following description by Jones (1996) indicates that Phillip had a full life in Job Corps and was well-liked by those around him.

“Phillip was a leader. He was an outstanding charismatic-type student,” Job Corps Officer Ike Johnson recalled. “He was the kind of student a lot of other students would like to emulate because he had those leadership qualities. People were just drawn to him. He had the attention of adults, which is unusual for a young man. It's almost like he was destined to become so much more in his life.”

Not only was Phillip a smart kid, he was a smart dresser and a good-looking guy. He had his choice of girls on campus and, having been there a while, had dated plenty. But it wasn't just the girls who liked Phillip, he was loved by those around him because he had a knack, a way of talking to people that got them on his side. (p. 194)

Meanwhile, Leslie Tisdel joined Job Corps to change her life. However, after meeting Phillip, she lost all interest in studying and started wanting Phillip to be the father of her child. Jones (1996) explains this as follows:

Leslie just wanted to learn to be more responsible, find a goal to strive for, and see the true value of life. On the day she headed up Opportunity Drive [the address of the Job Corps Center] toward the campus, she felt this was her big chance.

Almost from the moment Leslie met DeVine, she couldn't help but notice him—he was one of those people who stand out in a crowd. Being just a year older than her, age twenty-two, she was already thinking of him as marriage material. He was the right age, the right size, the right color for her

When Leslie eventually confided to Phillip that she had an interracial baby she wanted to regain custody of and raise, he seemed to jump at the idea. Phillip told her he'd help father the girl, and Leslie took what he said at face value. (pp. 194-5)

Despite her initial enthusiasm, in late November Leslie had to quit Job Corps due to abdominal pain from a previous tubular pregnancy. Going home, Leslie made Phillip promise

to come to Falls City, where she had a home, before Christmas. This is how Phillip ended up in the town where he was killed.

On December 14, Phillip went to Leslie's place, but Leslie's house was occupied by Lenny, a half-black man who seemed to be her boyfriend, and Phillip and Leslie had a fight about it. In Jones' book, there are references to Phillip's successful relationship with Lenny and with John Lotter and Tom Nissen, who eventually killed him.

That week, Lenny and Phil hung out with John Lotter and Tom Nissen a little bit. They all went down to Stanton Lake a few times, and John was usually a blast to be around, Tom was a bit of a jerk, but they all drank a lot and made jokes and didn't really pay attention to their differences. It wasn't like Lenny and Phil were being trashed or being called names. Everything was cool. (Jones, 1996, p. 205)

Thus, although Phillip was Black, he was a resourceful man who could get along well with John and Tom, who were white, and even with a man who appeared to be an ex-lover of his girlfriend.

So why did Phillip DeVine have to be killed? Phillip ended up fighting with Leslie again and left Leslie's house on December 30 to go to Lisa Lambert's house in Humboldt with Brandon, who was raped by John and Tom. Leslie describes what happened at that time:

She [Leslie] didn't appreciate Phil, so when DeVine decided to go off with Brandon to stay at Lambert's, Leslie drove the two of them up there, racing the car as fast as she could. She dropped them off around 6:00 in the morning and watched DeVine and Brandon walk to the front door. Lisa Lambert was waiting for them. (Jones, 1996, p. 16)

Lisa Lambert, Brandon Teena, and Phillip DeVine gathered at Lambert's house. The next day, December 31, at midnight, they were murdered by John Lotter and Tom Nissen. It can be said that Phillip and Lisa were killed because they happened to be with Brandon.

Jennifer Devere Brody (2007) discusses the removal of DeVine from *Boys Don't Cry*:

. . . the erasure of DeVine from the narrative places the white female bodies as the only true victims of crime: and the film's inability to show DeVine as violated rather than violator perpetuates the myth of the Black man as always already a perpetrator of crime. Perhaps it was seen as impossible to read an image of a straight middle-class Black male with a white girlfriend as an image of 'innocent' tragedy, particularly in the outlaw story that is Brandon's. (p. 291)

As mentioned above, Phillip DeVine was a very normal young Black man who lived a very straight life without committing crimes or using drugs, despite his many problems, including a disability, divorced parents, and a mother who was addicted to religion. In other words, as Brody states, DeVine did not fit the image that whites have of Blacks, such as violent or criminal. So what is it that makes whites hesitate to portray the "Black male" as a victim because of the strong image of him as a perpetrator?

Why Phillip DeVine Has Been Erased From the Film

We can infer why Kimberly Peirce did not include Phillip DeVine in *Boys Don't Cry* from the following portion of the *Los Angeles Times* article.

Many of Peirce's early drafts included the character of Philip Devine, a 22-year-old black man who had been living at the home of Lisa Lambert, where Teena also was living when the shooting took place. Devine was Leslie Tisdale's boyfriend. Teena, Lambert and Devine all were killed, but Peirce eventually cut Devine out of the movie and changed the name of the Lambert character.

"I frown on that," Leslie Tisdale said of Devine's omission

But leaving him in would've required adding Leslie Tisdale as a character to explain who Devine was, said Peirce. "I already had seven main characters," she said. "I didn't have room for Lana's sister." (Harrison, 2000)

In other words, Peirce reduced the number of victims from three to two in the film because there were too many characters. In her words, "I didn't have room for Lana's sister," not "I didn't have room for Phillip DeVine." For Peirce, the white protagonist's sister is more important than the Black victim. This shows how unimportant a Black victim is to Peirce. Here, I will explore the fundamental reasons behind letting the director of *Boys Don't Cry* say she did not depict the Black victim of the murders in Humboldt because there was no room. To find the cause, I will analyze how whites, including Peirce, view Blacks and racism in America.

Peirce said in one interview about her college days, "I was up at Columbia studying film, in a pretty straight, white, heteronormative male kind of environment I was getting the best education" (Reddish, 2019). Peirce's remarks suggest that she was surrounded by white peers on a daily basis, and that she was in an environment during her school years where she did not have to see racial issues as her own problem. Robin DiAngelo (2018), a researcher in critical discourse analysis and whiteness studies, explains colorblind racism as ". . . if we pretend not to notice race, then there can be no racism" (pp. 40-1).

One line of King's speech in particular—that one day he might be judged by the content of his character and not the color of his skin—was seized upon by the white public because the words were seen to provide a simple and immediate solution to racial tensions: pretend that we don't see race, and racism will end. Color blindness was now promoted as the remedy for racism, with white people insisting that they didn't see race or, if they did, that it had no meaning to them. (p. 41)

Regarding the exclusion of Phillip DeVine from *Boys Don't Cry*, Peirce's argument that DeVine could not be included without Leslie, because Leslie, Lana's sister, is the only person directly connected to DeVine, initially seems reasonable. In other words, it was not because he was Black that he was excluded from the film; rather, it was because there were too many characters. Just as other important white characters were removed, DeVine was also removed for the same reason. This is precisely practicing color blindness while ultimately firmly excluding a Black individual, effectively perpetuating Black discrimination. In this way, what Peirce is doing in *Boys Don't Cry*, even if there is no conscious intention to exclude a Black

individual, can be seen as ultimately leading to discrimination by excluding a Black man, while following the idea of being colorblind in American society.

Psychologist Jennifer Eberhardt (2019) explains the underlying psychology of hosts on the platform provided by Airbnb, which connects travelers seeking accommodations with homeowners willing to rent out their homes. She notes that white hosts registered with Airbnb are often inclined to avoid renting their homes to Black travelers.

After all, there are non-racial ways to explain away the rejection of a black applicant: *They have young kids, and my home has too many breakable items. They're on spring break, and I don't want people partying all week long.* It's easy to tell yourself that you don't see color, come up with a host of other justifications, and relieve yourself of any self-recrimination for your bias. (p. 192)

The psychological state of these hosts is probably akin to the implicit excuse given by Peirce that there was “no room” to include DeVine. In other words, the reason for not including DeVine is not directly related to skin color, but rather, another excuse, such as the lack of space, is created. The attitude of white Americans, who tend to make excuses to avoid recognizing prejudice within themselves in racial issues, is precisely what Peirce is doing to exclude DeVine. Behind Peirce's exclusion of DeVine lies the projection of the attitude where white Americans attempt to rationalize their actions with plausible explanations to make their racially discriminatory acts appear harmless.

DiAngelo (2018) states that in American society, the whiteness of white people is established as a status, which she describes as, “Being perceived as white carries more than a mere racial classification; it is a social and institutional status and identity imbued with legal, political, economic, and social rights and privileges that are denied to others” (p. 24). She explains that despite this, white people do not recognize the superiority of their whiteness.

Whiteness rests upon a foundational premise: the definition of whites as the norm or standard for human, and people of color as a deviation from that norm. Whiteness is not acknowledged by white people, and the white reference point is assumed to be universal and is imposed on everyone. White people find it very difficult to think about whiteness as a specific state of being that could have an impact on one's life and perceptions. (p. 25)

As Brody (2007) suggests that “the erasure of DeVine from the narrative places the white female bodies as the only true victims of crime” (p. 293), for Peirce, who is white, the significant victims of the Humboldt murder are perhaps only the white individuals, Brandon Teena and Lisa Lambert, while DeVine, who is Black, is seen as less important by comparison. This could be seen as a typical example of white supremacy, as described by DiAngelo, where white people believe that “the white reference point is assumed to be universal and is imposed on everyone.”

Peirce does not see the existence of the Black Phillip DeVine. Of course, although she is aware of his existence, to Peirce, DeVine's presence is insignificant, something to be ignored. Helen Ngo (2017), who specializes in critical philosophy of race and feminist philosophy, sees racism as a habit and describes the advantage that whites gain from their racism as follows:

Racism is not a matter of willful “intention” . . . , but is deeply embedded in our habitual bodies. . . . this level of inscription does not diminish the imperative of responsibility to work on our habit. . . . in a system of longstanding, entrenched, and continuing racism, whites who “do nothing” continue to benefit from the accrued advantages of white racism (pp. 42-3)

As Ngo suggests, Peirce's exclusion of DeVine from her film may have been not racially motivated, but rather habitual as a white person, meaning an unintentional exclusion. In other words, this exclusion of a Black individual is not just Peirce's issue. As Ngo states that racial discrimination is deeply embedded within the habitual body of white people, so Peirce may have simply practiced it within *Boys Don't Cry* without particularly recognizing it as a problem.

Conclusion

Boys Don't Cry was released in 1999. At the time of its release, the film received a great deal of attention for its portrayal of transgender Brandon Teena. However, the absence of another victim of the incident, Black individual Phillip DeVine, was not as widely examined in the context of this film. The strong impact of revealing transgender existence is understandable, but the lack of criticism regarding DeVine's absence suggests that the American media and audience, by not pointing out the absence of a Black individual, are effectively accepting unconscious racial discrimination without question. Therefore, what becomes apparent through Peirce's exclusion of DeVine is the lightness of Black presence in America and the pervasive white-centric racial perspective maintained by white people.

In fact, when Peirce filmed *Boys Don't Cry*, her strong desire may have been to capture the story of transgender individual Brandon Teena, rather than having racially discriminatory intentions to exclude a Black individual. However, it is possible that neither Peirce nor white Americans in general fully understood that the unconscious exclusion of DeVine was a form of racism. By depicting the story through the lens of white standards, *Boys Don't Cry* unintentionally exposed the deeply embedded racial prejudices within white Americans, as exemplified by their habitual embodiment.

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