

## *How Brandon Teena Is Portrayed in “Boys Don’t Cry”*

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### **Abstract**

A transgender person is a person whose sexual identity does not match the sexuality assigned at birth. Brandon Teena in *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999), directed by Kimberly Peirce and starring Hilary Swank, is a transgender male who was born female but identifies as male. However, when this film was released in 1999, transgenderism was not yet widely recognized around the world. In the pamphlet of the film in Japanese, Peirce herself describes Brandon as a woman who pretended to be a man. Therefore, Brandon is a woman in the film, and the relationship with her girlfriend Lana seems to be portrayed as a lesbian relationship. However, actual Brandon identified himself as a man, and he loved Lana as a man. Furthermore, Brandon is raped by his friends John and Tom, but this scene in the film seems to be depicted with the perception of a woman being raped by men, rather than a man being raped by men. Therefore, while this film is very important in that it brought the perception of transgenderism to the public's attention, it is problematic in how it portrays transgenderism. By considering the relationship between Brandon and Lana and the meaning of the rape of Brandon by John and Tom, I will prove that *Boys Don't Cry* does not portray the true nature of Brandon Teena, despite the acclaim it received when it was released, and that the film itself misunderstands those who struggle with gender identity issues such as Brandon's.

Keywords: *Boys Don’t Cry*, Brandon Teena, Transgender, Lesbian, Rape

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## Introduction

A transgender person is a person whose gender identity does not match the sexuality assigned at birth. Brandon Teena in *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), directed by Kimberly Peirce and starring Hilary Swank, is a transgender man who was born female but identifies as a man. However, when this film was released in 1999, transgenderism was not yet widely recognized around the world. In her comments in the Japanese pamphlet of the film, Peirce herself describes Brandon Teena as "a typical homosexual type who leaves home in search of love and a place that accepts her" and as "a woman who pretended to be a man" (p. 16). Thus, in the film, Brandon Teena is persistently a woman, and therefore his relationship with his girlfriend Lana is portrayed as if it were a lesbian relationship. In reality, however, Brandon Teena identified himself as a man, and he loved Lana as a man. Furthermore, Brandon is raped by his friends John and Tom, but this scene in the film seems to be depicted with the perception of a woman being raped by men, rather than a man being raped by men. Therefore, while this film is very important in that it brought to the public's attention the existence of people like Brandon, who suffer from the discrepancy between sex at birth and self-identified sex, but it is problematic in how it depicts Brandon as a transgender person.

In this paper, by investigating why the relationship between Brandon and Lana is portrayed as a lesbian relationship rather than a relationship between a transgender man and a woman and by considering the implications of John and Tom's rape and murder of Brandon, I will prove that *Boys Don't Cry* does not portray the true nature of Brandon Teena despite the reaction and acclaim it received at the time of its release, and that the film itself misunderstands people like Brandon who are struggling with gender identity.

## Brandon Teena Portrayed as a Lesbian

In *Boys Don't Cry*, Brandon completely changes his clothes and hairstyle to male in his hometown of Lincoln, goes to Falls City, where no one knows him, and is accepted as a man by the local young people, Lana, Candice, John, and Tom. And at this point, Brandon's relationship with Lana is portrayed as a male-female relationship. In their first make love scene, Lana accepts Brandon as a man. After Brandon escapes from John and Tom, he hides in the barn of Candace's house, where Lana arrives, and Brandon and Lana make love again. Their make love at this point is not between a man and a woman but between two women who love each other.

Judith Halberstam (2007) also points out their relationship as follows:

... Peirce suddenly and catastrophically divests her character of his transgender gaze and converts it to a lesbian and therefore female gaze. In a strange scene, which follows the brutal rape of Brandon by John and Tom, Lana comes to Brandon as he lies sleeping in a shed outside Candace's house. In many ways the encounter that follows seems to extend the violence enacted upon Brandon's body by John and Tom, since Brandon now interacts with Lana *as if he were a woman*. Lana, contrary to her previous commitment to his masculinity, seems to see him as female, calling him 'pretty' and asking him what he was like as a girl. (p. 280)

In this scene, Brandon is a woman who has been raped and hurt, and Lana comforts her through make love. This is not a relationship between a man and a woman, but a lesbian relationship between two women. Thus, in the film, Brandon Teena appears to be portrayed

as a lesbian woman, not a trans man. Why is this? Here, I will explore the reasons by focusing on the newspaper article that inspired director Kimberly Peirce to make this film and Peirce's own lesbian identity and consider how these factors influence the way Brandon is portrayed.

Regarding the impetus for Kimberly Peirce to make *Boys Don't Cry*, Norran Vincent writes in a 1999 article in *The Village Voice*, "The film's director, Kimberly Peirce, first encountered the [Brandon Teena's] story, as broken by Donna Minkowitz, in The 'Village Voice' of April 19, 1994, and was inspired to turn it into a movie." Furthermore, Minkowitz admits in an article she wrote in 2018 that her 1994 article was the catalyst for Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* production. "*Boys Don't Cry* director Kimberly Peirce told me in a recent interview that my article had been the major inspiration for her film about Brandon's life and murder: 'Your article was on fire. I read it and I fell in love with Brandon. It made me love his vulnerability, his daring, his innocence, the way that he gave pleasure sexually. I was in love with this person who had shaped himself.'"

However, in her article, Minkowitz admits that she was wrong in her 1994 article that led Peirce to decide to make the film:

For years, I have wanted to apologize for what I now understand, with some shame, was the article's implicit anti-trans framing. Without spelling it out, the article cast Brandon as a lesbian who hated "her" body because of prior experiences of childhood sexual abuse and rape ...

At the time, I was extremely ignorant about trans people. Like many other cis queer people at the time, I didn't know ... that being trans had nothing to do with whether you were straight or gay ...

Even in New York City, someone like me, a journalist who considered myself very involved in queer radical politics, could be massively ignorant about what it meant to be transgender.

In this article, Minkowitz, herself a lesbian, admits that she did not know who transgender people were in 1994. In other words, this is proof by Minkowitz, a newspaper reporter, of the lack of transgender awareness at the time Brandon's case occurred. Thus, for Peirce, who was inspired by the article Minkowitz wrote about Brandon as a lesbian, the perception was that Brandon was a lesbian from the beginning.

However, Minkowitz also writes the following as told to her by Brandon's acquaintances. "One of Brandon's acquaintances had told me he'd said he was 'disgusted by lesbians,' and several friends said Brandon had said, 'I can't be with a woman as a woman. That's gross.'" Thus, despite the testimony that Brandon had denied being a lesbian to those around him, Minkowitz considered Brandon to be a lesbian. Her "ignorance," in other words, was that she was unaware of the concept of transgenderism itself, and to Minkowitz, the fact that Brandon loved Lana, who was physically a woman, meant that Brandon was a lesbian like herself. The reason that the relationship between Brandon and Lana in the film appears to be a lesbian relationship is that Peirce was deluded by Minkowitz's view of Brandon without questioning it.

Furthermore, another possible reason why their relationship has been portrayed as lesbian is that Peirce herself is a lesbian. Michael Musto, in an article about his interview with Peirce, writes of Peirce: “She’s an out lesbian ...” In an interview by Stephanie Fairington, Peirce is introduced as “I know a lot of queer people, including myself ...” Furthermore, in an interview by David Reddish, Peirce describes her time as a graduate student at Columbia University as follows: “I, at that point, was realizing I was a queer. I never really used the word ‘lesbian,’ but I was falling in love with women and sleeping with them. I’m on the trans scale somewhere.” In another interview by James Kleinmann, she says, “I’m a trans butch. I’m a female-bodied person who loves being female-bodied, but I’m also a male.” Thus, Peirce identifies herself as a woman who loves women, or a lesbian. Jack Halberstam (1998) says about the distinction between trans men and lesbians. “So while it is true that transgender and transsexual men have been wrongly folded into lesbian history, it is also true that the distinctions between some transsexual identities and some lesbian identities may at times become quite blurry” (p. 150). As Halberstam states, Peirce may have misinterpreted transgenderism as a form of lesbianism.

However, there is a fundamental difference between Brandon, a trans man who identified as a man and loved women as a man, and Peirce, who identified as a woman and loved women as a woman. Peirce may not have been familiar with the concept of transgenderism at the time of making the film, just as Minkowitz may have considered Brandon a lesbian. Peirce may have overemphasized the “love of women” aspect of the film and portrayed Brandon as a lesbian.

Peirce, in an interview with Reddish, describes Brandon's gender identity as follows:

I lean towards a female-bodied person that lived as a man. I called him “he” always. I lean towards the transperson interpretation of Brandon. But we don’t know for sure. What we do know, if you’ve seen the autopsy pictures, is that Brandon was a female-bodied person who, as far as I know, [n]ever had a hormone, never had sexual surgery, and Brandon did not gravitate towards the queer community. He overtly said “I’m not a dyke.”

This interview was conducted in 2019, and unlike in 1999 when Peirce created *Boys Don't Cry*, the concept of transgenderism was already commonplace. It is precisely because the concept of transgenderism has become commonplace that Peirce was able to acknowledge Brandon's view of himself as a transperson.

Brandon Teena was a trans man. However, it was difficult to accurately portray a trans man at the time the film was made, when the concept of transgenderism was not prevalent. Both Peirce, who produced the film, and Minkowitz, who wrote the article to which Peirce referred, were ignorant of transgenderism at the time, and both are lesbians. There is no doubt that the historical context of the film's production and the fact that the filmmakers were lesbians greatly influenced Brandon's portrayal.

### **The Meaning of Rape and Murder Against Brandon**

It is naturally shocking for a trans man to be raped by men, but is it the same as when a woman is raped by men? By examining the way to depict the scene where Brandon is raped and murdered by John and Tom, I will consider the problems with the way Brandon is portrayed in this film.

Shon Faye (2021), a trans woman herself, describes the rape of trans men by men:

While, globally, the vast majority of trans people murdered are trans women, vicious violence is also unleashed on trans men. In South Africa, to cite just one example, trans men have—like butch lesbians—been subjected to so-called ‘corrective’ rape: a use of rape as punishment for gender deviance intended to force them ‘back’ into being (heterosexual) women. (p. 255)

In this film, too, John and Tom consider Brandon to be a lesbian, or a woman, and as Faye states, by raping Brandon, who is physically a woman, they are punishing Brandon, who calls himself a trans man, to make him realize that he is a woman. In addition, the rape is not only a punishment for Brandon, but also a way to make him realize his female identity. Furthermore, when it is learned that Brandon has complained to the police about the rape, John and Tom head to Candace's house to kill Brandon, but when Lana gets into the car with them, John tells her, “We're just takin' care of a couple of dykes. Are you one of 'em?” From this statement, it can be understood that John is trying to punish Brandon, a lesbian, not only by “raping,” but also by “killing.” Halberstam (2007), in describing the murders of Brandon and Candace by John and Tom after the rape, says, “The murders, in the end, are shown to be the result of a kind of homosexual panic” (p. 282). Thus, the film can be interpreted to portray the rape and murder of Brandon as a hate crime that occurred because Brandon is a lesbian (dyke).

However, regarding the actual Brandon murder, Minkowitz states: “While so far, the record seems to buttress that [Tom] Nissen and [John] Lotter went to that Humboldt farmhouse [the scene of the murders] explicitly to silence Brandon—his mother says, ‘Teena said [after the rape] that these guys told her to keep her mouth shut or they’d permanently shut it for her’ ...” If this view is correct, then Brandon's murder was not a hate crime, but retaliation by John and Tom for Brandon's reporting the rape to the police. Peirce seems to be trying to give Brandon's death a loftier meaning of hate crime in this film, but in fact it could be a more vulgar crime by John and Tom to eliminate the victim in order to cover their own crimes. By portraying Brandon as a female victim of a hate crime, Peirce turns Brandon's story into a heroic legend. In exchange for this moving narrative, Peirce fails to explore Brandon's true nature as a trans man.

In addition, Masae Torai, a trans man who actually underwent sex reassignment surgery and changed from female to male, describes in the Japanese pamphlet of *Boys Don't Cry* how he would feel if someone like Brandon, who identifies as male, was raped by men.

I also want to say that if you have gender identity disorder, being raped will never shake your gender identity as a man. I myself had an internal examination for ovarian disease, and it's like, whatever they do to my temporary body. I know that in the movie they [John and Tom] raped Brandon with the intention of reminding him that he is a woman, but it doesn't work. I want to say that strongly. (p. 13)

How much Brandon was actually hurt by the rape is not for anyone other than himself to guess and say. As Faye says, the rapist may feel that he is punishing Brandon, but for the raped Brandon, rather than being shocked by the rape itself, as Torai says, he was shocked by the violence and betrayal from John and Tom, who had accepted him as a man and a friend.

In fact, Brandon reported the rape to the police, but was extremely shocked when the sheriff dug into his past sexual experiences and sexual orientation, which were not directly related to the rape. Aphrodite Jones, in her book *All She Wanted* (1996) about this incident, describes this time as “[Brandon] Teena told them [the sheriff and the deputy] she was experiencing a sexual identity crisis, but when asked about it, she couldn't explain what that meant” (p. 226). In the interview by Anya Jaremko-Greenwold, Peirce says of the rape scene, “That rape scene—I always knew it was going to be intercut with the sheriff. I had a sense that the sheriff had raped Brandon too, by making Brandon reveal *how* he was raped.” Certainly, the interrogation by the sheriff must have been a very painful experience for Brandon. The problem here, however, is that Peirce lacks the perspective that Brandon was a trans man; Peirce portrays Brandon as a woman who was raped by men. As Torai states, even after the rape, Brandon's gender identity as a man should not have wavered. That is why Brandon actually described his sexuality to the sheriffs as “a sexual identity crisis.” However, how many people at that time could understand the meaning of “a sexual identity crisis”? By portraying Brandon as a woman in the rape scene, Peirce abandons the idea of facing “a sexual identity crisis,” which Brandon actually said out of desperation.

As have been discussed, Peirce's depiction of the rape and murder of Brandon by John and Tom can be interpreted as a sympathetic tragedy that happened to a woman who self-identifies as a man, rather than as an investigation into the nature of Brandon as a trans man.

## **Conclusion**

Although Brandon Teena did not undergo gender transition surgery or hormone therapy, it is clear that he was a trans man whose gender assigned at birth (female) did not match his self-identified gender (male). However, while Brandon in Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* is portrayed as a trans male in some parts, his relationship with Lana and the way the rape is depicted can be interpreted as a female in those parts. The fact that Brandon and Lana's make love looks like a female-on-female one and that Brandon appears to be raped as a woman can be attributed to the fact that Peirce is a lesbian and that the reporter who wrote the newspaper article Peirce based the film on considered Brandon a lesbian. Certainly, the concept of transgenderism may not have been common in the 1990s, when the film was made, but it is undeniable that the nature of Brandon was distorted by the assumptions of those reporting the case and producing the film.

Peirce admits in the interview by Fairyrington that Brandon was not a lesbian, but speculates, based on Brandon's diary, that Brandon may have also been interested in being a woman.

In all research of Brandon Teena, from interviews with people who had met him and loved him, to reading his journal entries and listening to tapes of him, I concluded that he did not seem to make moves to present as queer or to identify as a lesbian. He did make moves to live as a straight guy in a relatively straight world, dating women and being buddies with the guys .... However, I read in his diary that he wondered what it would be like to be a girl. That led me to believe that while he wanted to be a straight man, he also had a curiosity about his female bodiedness.

Peirce, who found a queer side to herself, may have seen herself in Brandon, and it is Peirce's empathy for Brandon that gave birth to Brandon as a lesbian rather than a trans man.

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