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The Workings of Interpellations: Speech Acts between Empowerment and Defeat in *Boys Don't Cry*

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ABSTRACT

Set against the cultural debates on LGBTQ+ rights in the 1990s United States, this article examines Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) through the lenses of queer linguistics and Butler's theory of interpellation. It proposes a reading of the film's speech acts as a linguistic counterpart to what Halberstam has called its "transgender gaze" to argue that the script constructs a parallel "transgender voice" through Brandon Teena's performance of masculinity. Attention is given to scenes of misnaming, third-person self-reference, and performative self-identification, which on the one hand reveal language as both a site of injury and resistance, and on the other define gender identity not as the product of sovereign self-declaration but rather as the outcome of the interplay between subjectivity and external recognition/denial. By bringing together Butler's discussion of hate speech in *Excitable Speech* and the movie's staging of repeated acts of self-affirmation and interpellation, this contribution explores the potentiality and limitations of language in defining identities.

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KEYWORDS: *Boys Don't Cry*; speech acts; interpellation; transgender identity; self-affirmation.

The 1990s are a decade of undisputable relevance to the political and cultural debate over LGBTQ+ rights in the US. In the span of a few years, in fact, there is both the institution of the Don't Ask Don't Tell policy – with its injunction to relegate to a juridically sanctioned closet the lives and voices of gays and lesbians in the military – and the academic success of queer theory – with its radical questioning of Western subjectivity aiming not just at liberating non-heteronormative individuals from oppression, but at achieving a paradigm shift in shared notions of society and citizenship.

The tensions implicit in these diverging discursive trajectories are reflected at multiple levels in the field of representation of LGBTQ+ characters and experiences. While, in fact, the new queer cinema of the time (an art form that is by definition non-commercial) was readily celebrated “for the way it gave agency to queer subjectivity, recognizing queerness as characterized by a multiplicity of conflicting voices and visions” (Cunningham 2007, 169), television, the mainstream form of entertainment par excellence, was negotiating the new boundaries of visibility for gay characters, for example cancelling in 1998 the sitcom *Ellen* after the lead actor Ellen DeGeneres had come out at the same time that her character did and launching in the same year *Will & Grace* as the first prime-time show with openly gay protagonists.

The many levels (philosophical, juridical, political, representational) of this debate coalesce and intersect in the reaction to two episodes of unspeakable violence that, by exposing the extreme vulnerability of queer bodies, catalyzed the attention of the public opinion and prompted a sustained discussion around the need for hate crime and hate speech legislation. The first one is the brutal rape and subsequent killing of Brandon Teena, a young transgender man, in Humboldt, Nebraska on December 31 of 1993. Two other people, Lisa Lambert and Phillip DeVine, were killed merely for being on the scene, leaving Lambert’s toddler son as the only survivor of the massacre perpetrated by John Lotter and Tom Niessen, who were common acquaintances to all the victims. The second one is the horrifying assault against Matthew Shepard, a 21-year-old gay university student who, in October 1998, was wildly beaten, robbed and left to die tied to a fence in an isolated rural area near Laramie, Wyoming.

Both Teena and Shepard have become the object of a number of cultural productions that memorialize their lives, narrate their tragic deaths, and expose the homophobic and transphobic cultural milieus enabling the perpetration of deadly violence against their bodies. In particular, the proliferation of texts and visual materials around the life and death of Brandon Teena, fueled by an obsessive preoccupation with his transgendered body and sexual identity, has generated what Jack (then Judith) Halberstam has called “The Brandon archive” (2005, 22-46), an impressive accumulation of facts, narratives, images, fantasies constituting a body of knowledge on and around this victim of transphobic violence and extending well beyond whatever historical truth can be ascertained about him.

Within this vast catalogue of responses to the so-called Humboldt massacre, a prominent place is occupied by Kimberly Peirce's debut movie *Boys Don't Cry*¹. Released in 1999 to universal critical acclaim and maybe not fully expected mainstream success², the project had been years in the making, its temporal development spanning from the early news reports about the killings, published in 1994 when Peirce was a student at Columbia University, to the filming taking place in October-November 1998, coincidentally the time of Matthew Shepard's death. Based on a wealth of documentary evidence, including interviews, police reports, and court hearings, *Boys Don't Cry* makes a decisive move towards a fictionalized rendering of the facts, while simultaneously taking full advantage of the aura of authenticity surrounding the story³. In other words, it constitutes a

¹ Another notable element in the archive is the documentary *The Brandon Teena Story* by Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir released in 1998, which was one of the sources Peirce and her co-writer Andy Bienen used to script the dialogues in *Boys Don't Cry*.

² The impact of *Boys Don't Cry* both inside and outside the movie industry is undoubtable. With an impressive list of 37 awards won, \$12 million earned only in the US, both the Golden Globe and the Academy Award going to then almost unknown Hilary Swank for her stunning performance in the leading role, Peirce's debut took by storm the circuit of film festivals around the world and commanded unprecedented attention to transgender issues in mainstream culture. Despite its emphasis on an empathetic representation of a trans character, the movie has been more recently harshly criticized by a new generation of trans activists not only for the choice to cast a cis-gender actress in the lead role, but also for being a prominent example of cultural productions clearly aimed at "educating" cis viewers (rather than equally addressing both cis and trans people in the audience) by way of spectacularizing violence against trans bodies. See Bendix 2019; Lodge 2019; Kneigt 2019; Dry 2016.

³ The most striking liberty the movie takes from historical accuracy is the full erasure of Philippe DeVine from the narrative. DeVine was an African American disabled young man who was acquainted with both the other victims and the murderers; like Teena, he was staying at Lisa Lambert's house the night of the massacre and found his death there. His presence on the scene and among Teena's acquaintances has been removed from the narrative to the point that the movie functions as a representation of a homogeneously white Nebraska from where issues of racism have been removed by removing non-white characters: "there is no hint of color in the community, fitting with stereotypical images of both the American Midwest and Plains" (Dando 2005, 102). Yet, one of the two murderers (Tom Nissen) had been close to white extremist groups as a teenager, a fact that would support an understanding of the killings as being at least in part incited not only by transphobic but also by racial hatred (see Minkowitz 2018 and Dunne 1997). In DeVere Brody's words, "Peirce participates, however unwittingly, in a larger pattern of leaving race out of the picture so that other identity categories appear stable and queerness is represented in an [sic]

fully autonomous, self-sufficient artistic project, whose scope and politics exceed the aim of doing justice to the victim of a case of rape and murder, yet incessantly calls attention, like a semantically complex indexical sign, to the real-life events behind its narrative. Quite predictably, it has attracted considerable scholarly attention over the years, with readings that place it at the intersection of queer theory with cinema studies, linguistics, gender studies, and musicology, to name but a few of the academic fields within which it has been investigated, witnessing to its considerable formal and thematic complexity.

Among the most impactful analyses of the movie is Halberstam's chapter "The Transgender Look" from his book *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), which offers a brilliant reading of the visual grammar of the film highlighting the latter's contradictory representation of the protagonist's sexuality and gender. Halberstam convincingly argues that the film first produces what he calls a transgender gaze that "opens the door to a nonfetishistic mode of seeing the transgender body – a mode that looks with, rather than at, the transgender body" (92), but then ultimately betrays this perspective and the central character's self-definition and identity by somehow enclosing his relationship with his girlfriend Lana Tisdell within the more familiar contours of lesbianism. The movie is read by Halberstam as a "failure of nerve that leads Peirce to conclude the film with a humanist scene of love conquers all" (91).

While the semiotic relevance of images must always be assumed when critically addressing a cinematic text, what is particularly interesting in Halberstam's approach to the visual language of the film is the attention given not only, and not predominantly, to the content of the images, but rather to the more abstract level of the way in which alternative ways of seeing are inscribed in the filmic technique as a shared experience between the characters and the audience that

way that makes it synonymous with whiteness" (2002, 94). Cunningham goes as far as to maintain that "the nexus of race and class" (2007, 169) is foregrounded in new queer cinema through the deployment of the category of white trash as a way to queer whiteness and its default association with middle-class values and privileges: "Labeling people white trash ... is to queer whiteness, rendering it relational and strange, by marking class-based shortcomings in racial terms. White trash makes whiteness visible" (170). Despite the decentering and destabilization of whiteness such a reading highlights, it is undeniable that "the production of a pure white queer subjectivity in this film is achieved through the excision of black humanity" (DeVere Brody 2002, 91).

opens up the possibility of a transgender look whereby “spectators ... adopt, if only provisionally, Brandon’s gaze” (86). It is such gaze, which Brandon turns on the world around him but also on himself – most notably in a scene where he has an out-of-body experience and looks at himself as John and Tom assault and restrain him in order to expose his genitalia – that, according to Halberstam, constitutes “the Brandon who survives his own rape and murder; ... the Brandon to whom the audience is now sutured, a figure who combines momentarily the activity of looking with the passivity of the spectacle” (88).

Building on this insightful analysis of the visual syntax governing the gaze in *Boys Don’t Cry*, the present reading calls attention to comparable (albeit not identical) strategies deployed in the movie with regard to verbal language. It is my contention that the intersubjective dynamics set into motion not only by Brandon’s physical presentation as a male (his dress-code, hairstyle, and body posture), but also and crucially by his linguistic performance of (transgender) straight masculinity eventually result into a form of symbolic survival to the annihilating forces that by killing his body actually aim at destroying his self-affirmed identity. The divided look that allows Brandon’s transgender identity to survive, intact in the eyes of the audience despite the character’s physical vulnerability, is in fact replicated and thus reinforced in his linguistic acts of self-identification, as well as in the reactions they elicit. Such linguistic behavior produces within language a space of transgender expression that is the verbal counterpart to Halberstam’s gaze and gives rise to a subjectivity simultaneously capable of survival in the face of utter brutality and radically exposed to vicious scrutiny and denial. Looking at this specific aspect of *Boys Don’t Cry* allows us not only to better grasp the multimodal syntax of the movie, but also to interrogate the specific force of performative speech acts in relation to the constitution of transgender subjectivity.

To substantiate this reading, I resort throughout this article to the well-known theory of interpellation developed by Judith Butler in *Excitable Speech* (1997), where she brings together Austin’s theory of speech acts and Althusser’s theory of subjectivity. Butler’s aim in the book is to reflect on the theoretical implications and undesired political consequences of an understanding of hate speech as performative speech acts. She convincingly argues against the tightening of the relationship between hate speech and the injury it causes, a tightening

advocated by some under the principle that an injurious speech act does not cause injury but rather is itself the injury it causes as it constitutes its target in a position of subordination. Butler notices the potential pitfalls of this theory for all marginal subjectivities whose discourse might be constituted as hate speech by dominant groups, and thus silenced⁴. The present reading of *Boys Don't Cry* extends her reflections from hate speech – i.e. speech that aims to harm the other – to self-affirming speech – i.e. speech that aims to empower the self, since, as I will try to demonstrate in the coming pages, the movie deploys both the affirming potential and the inevitable limits of linguistic markers of gender identification.

The return from this specific perspective to a text that – despite the flaws found in its politics by a younger generation of activists – has undoubtedly played an important role in bringing the subject of violence against trans bodies at the center of mainstream debates seems all but superfluous at a moment when in the U.S. (and, through the supranational networks of far-right discourse, across the world) non-conforming gender identities are made the target of an unprecedented effort to enforce language policies and to police bodies in a declared attempt to go back in time to an epoch where dissent was silenced and conformity was the rule.

1. “They say I’m the best boyfriend they ever had”: gender identity and the discourse of the Other.

The narrative arc of *Boys Don't Cry* covers the last eventful weeks in the life of Brandon Teena. Following him as he moves from Lincoln to Falls City almost by accident after a bar brawl, we see him being introduced to Candace Lambert's friends⁵, including Lana Tisdel, who will soon become his girlfriend, and John Lotter and Tom Niessen, two ex-convicts who will rape him upon finding

⁴ This sort of boomerang effect is made all too visible by recent events in the US such as the abolition of entire DEI programs or the career damage to academics who have dared to make conservative students uncomfortable by assigning readings that are not aligned to their core beliefs.

⁵ Candace is the fictional name given to real life Lisa Lambert.

out that he has lied to them about his biological sex, and then will kill him for reporting the rape to the police. Anything that has happened in Brandon's life before this dramatic acceleration – his troublesome past as a trailer-park kid, his mother's hostility, his petty crimes – is left to the viewers to reconstruct based on the scant references disseminated in the story. By implication, the specific moment in Brandon's life that functions as the viewer's access to the diegetic world of the movie is understood as the starting point in the chain of events ultimately leading to the protagonist's tragic death, a symbolic watershed simultaneously marking a break with the past and intensifying the longing for a future that still appears rife with possibilities.

Such decisive moment is narrated as the culmination of a process by which Brandon achieves a self-presentation that is socially intelligible as male, despite his being anatomically female and having not started any medical treatment towards gender transition. The opening scenes focus in fact on Brandon's excited appropriation and elated deployment of a set of traits that socially signify masculinity – from having his hair cut really short to wearing strategically stuffed male clothes, from donning a cowboy hat to the bravado of dating a straight girl – a move that is later sealed by the manipulation of his birth name (from Teena Brandon to Brandon Teena) to reflect a permanent embracing of maleness as the body expression that best reflects his sense of self.

In a cinematic sequence that perfectly illustrates both the performative character of gender constructions (Butler 1990) and the socially influenced process of meaning making (Kress 1993), Brandon selects from the semiotic resources available to him “the actions, materials and artifacts” (van Leeuwen 2005, 285) that allow him to express his masculinity within the semiotic regime he inhabits. His embodied performance of gender encapsulates the way in which such regime is in turn shaped by socially regulated articulations of power by seamlessly weaving the meaning potential (based on shared past practices) and possible uses (what social semiotics calls “affordances”) of each marker of masculinity he appropriates. The whole process evidences how signs are never merely or passively used in communication but are rather “always newly *made* in social interaction... out of the interest of the maker of the signs” (Kress 2010, 54), an interest that also responds to the power relations structuring the environment where the communication takes place, be it by upholding, replicating, or resisting them.

We see Brandon as he gets ready for a night out, the typical grooming rituals of young men emphasized and queered not only by the fact of being enacted by a body pronounced female at birth, but also for being carried out with the assistance of a gay man, Brandon's cousin Lonny. The latter in fact supervises the protagonist's overall aesthetic choices and, by acting as the arbiter of credible masculinity, makes sure he does not appear in public as an obvious drag king.

The accumulation of external signifiers of masculinity, which allow him to roam the streets of Lincoln unnoticed among other young men, is however not enough for Brandon, who longs for a form of recognition and affirmation that can only come from the outside. Acknowledging his cousin's successful passing, Lonny wonders: "So you're a boy, now what?", to which Brandon replies announcing that he has a date for the night: a straight girl, unaware of the complexity of his gender performance, to whom he presents as a cis-gender male, thus setting into motion, forcing even, the process of interpellation from the outside upon which his full constitution as a male subject is dependent. The scene establishes early in the movie the dynamics of naming and address as central and pervasive questions in the unravelling of Brandon's story, a significance that is confirmed moments later by the repetition of a similar, yet more consequential, scene of interpellation. In this case, in fact, instead of addressing a girl in order to solicit a form of recognition on her part that should validate his masculinity, Brandon is directly approached by a young woman at a bar:

CANDACE: Bad night?

BRANDON: The worst. So what's your name?

CANDACE: [Giggles] Candace. I hate it, though. I'm thinkin' of changin' it.

BRANDON: Sometimes that helps. I'm Brandon.

Candace's address comes unannounced at a moment when Brandon is not intentionally pursuing recognition and thus acts on him with the full force of an interpellation that "animates [him] into existence" (Butler 1997, 25) and constitutes him as a man, producing his "social contours in space and time" (34). In this sense, Brandon's story can be read both as a linguistic crisis and a gender one. Indeed, if, as Butler maintains, "it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body becomes possible" (5), then the whole question of Brandon's social existence as a male subject, the very

possibility for his body to be “known”, be it through recognition or abjection, becomes first and foremost a linguistic one. The exchange quoted above inaugurates a new phase in the life of the protagonist, one in which, away from his native Lincoln and surrounded by people for whom he has always been Brandon and never Teena, his own speech acts of self-identification and the reiterated instances of address from the outside seem for the first time to perfectly align.

Brandon is almost hyperreactive to external address, showing an insuppressible impulse to respond, and correspond, to the often barely spoken desires of the girls around him. A most striking instance of this is provided by his claim to Candace – as soon as she flirtatiously comments on how naturally he acts towards her toddler son – that he himself has a child. The story, a big and unnecessary lie in the framework of his budding acquaintance with the girl, suggests how Brandon is producing, by mere reaction to the compliment, the fantasy of a caring family man that, on the one hand, virtually fills the gap left by an absent partner and father in Candace’s domestic life, and on the other, projects a reconfiguration on his side of yet another domain of hegemonic masculinity. The lie, in addition to playing on the girl’s feelings, acts on Brandon’s perception of the adequacy of his own gender performance vis-a-vis the social positioning Candace is evoking, so that he feels triggered to implicate that not only has he a masculine-presenting body, but a male biology as well, that has enabled him to impregnate a woman.

Despite some practical inconvenience (such as having to procure tampons when he gets his period) and the risks he runs being a passing transgender man in Falls City – a place Lonny associates to backwardness (“that’s not even on the map”) and homophobia (“they hang faggots down there”) – the mutually reinforcing operation of performative speech acts and external interpellation provides Brandon with a sense of himself finally marked by coherence and stability as to his gender identity. The unprecedented exhilaration makes him shift from thinking that changing one’s name “sometimes helps” to believing that he has successfully renamed himself into a new social positioning, to the point that he happily announces an incredulous Lonny that he intends to marry Lana. Brandon’s excitement and happiness pervade this part of the movie and suture the viewer to his gender performance, occluding the ongoing operation of reiterated modes of interpellation that consolidate his identity. For a brief time before the

catastrophe, Brandon embodies and projects on the audience the delusional belief in a sovereign subjectivity preexisting interpellation that expresses its gender identity through illocutionary speech acts having the power to constitute into being the positionality, i.e. the identity, they declare, thus soliciting in return coherent recognition from the outside.

Indeed, there are attempts in the field of queer linguistics to look at statements of one's gender identity as having all the defining characteristics of Austin's illocutionary speech acts, that is the capacity to do what they say, at the very moment when they are said by someone who has the authoritative power to perform the deed by performing the speech. Barrett, for example, claims that "statements such as ... 'I'm a lesbian' have an illocutionary performative effect in that they immediately cause a change by placing an individual within a given identity category" (2002, 28). For this to be true, however, one needs to postulate the existence of a sovereign subject that exerts full control on the speech acts constituting him/her as a positionality in time and space, a notion that is incompatible with the queer theory of performativity emphasizing how subjectivity is linguistically inaugurated within discourses that precede the subject, and for this reason are always at least partially out of the subject's control. This is not to say that statements like the one Barrett discusses have no performative power at all, but rather that the effects proceeding from them are not the ones he envisions. Illocutionary statements, in fact, are the ones that "not only perform an action, but confer a *binding power* on the action performed" (Butler 1993, 171, emphasis mine). As Butler further points out in *Excitable Speech*, "when one declares that one is a homosexual, the declaration is the performative act – not the homosexuality, unless we want to claim that homosexuality *is* itself nothing but a kind of declaration, which would be an odd move to make" (1997, 22, emphasis in the original). The performative act of saying "I'm a lesbian" is therefore that of claiming one's positioning within a certain identity category, without the actual positioning resulting as the sole, necessary, or inevitable outcome of the statement.

The delusional euphoria of sovereign subjectivity is brought to a sudden end in *Boys Don't Cry* when Brandon is forced, for the first time since his arrival in Falls City, to face the fact that he cannot get rid by an act of will of the interpellations he no longer identifies with, and that he considers by now injurious. Upon trying to pay for a speed ticket, he is approached by a police officer who

repeatedly addresses him as “Miss Brandon” and informs him that a quick computer search has brought to light his past in Lincoln (where he has a pending charge against him for grand theft auto) alongside his “real” name, that is, the name under which he exists within the discourses of state apparatuses. After trying to resist the address, pretending he cannot react to someone else’s name, Brandon’s reply witnesses to his disassociation from a subjectivity that he feels is forced upon him: “Wow. This Teena chick seems pretty messed up”. The legal and bureaucratic discourse, indifferent to his protest, keeps constituting him as a female; yet, such constitution, despite the power it allows to be wielded over his body (by placing him in the female section of the jail, for example), no longer produces forms of identification on Brandon’s part, who experiences them as utterly injurious acts of naming. In other words, “Brandon Teena” and “Teena Brandon” name the same person but produce different positionalities, the former from within, trying to establish an illocutionary power for the act of stating one’s identity, the latter from the outside, asserting the force of pre-existing discourses calling the subject into being.

The scene marks a turning point in the mood of *Boys Don’t Cry*, shifting it from hopeful excitement to fear before impending tragedy, and precipitates Brandon in the nightmare of being repeatedly mis-named as his performative masculinity is resignified as abject. Brandon’s use of the third person to talk about “this Teena chick” voices the shock of recognition caused by being “constituted by discourse, but at a distance from oneself” (Butler 1997, 33). He does the same when Lana visits him in jail, and he tries to come up with a far-fetched explanation for the fact of being in the female section:

BRANDON: I’m a hermaphrodite. ... It’s a person who has both... girl and boy parts. Brandon’s real name is Teena Brandon. Well, see, Brandon’s not quite a he. Brandon’s more like a sh...

LANA: Shut up. It’s your business.

Motschenbacher notices how

When listening carefully to this passage, one can even hear that *Brandon* practices an incorrect pronunciation of the word *hermaphrodite*, which rather sounds like ‘heramphodite’ (/həˈræmfədəɪt/) in his mouth. This is a further sign that *Brandon* has not really accepted this as an identity label for himself. ... Formulated as a third

person narrative, he self-consciously distances himself from his identity (instead of taking a self-confident stance voiced in the first person). At the end of the utterance, he is interrupted by *Lana* who does not want him to be exposed to that definitional struggle any longer. (2010, 164, italics in the original)

While I agree that Brandon's hesitation in uttering the word "hermaphrodite" and his use of the third person are significant here, it seems to me that these cannot be read as indicating a lack of acceptance of, or a distancing from, *his* identity, as Motschenbacher's reasoning implies. Brandon seems rather to be using the (probably unfamiliar) word "hermaphrodite" as a floating signifier of anatomical ambiguity to utter what he already knows to be a false identification. Brandon knows he is not a hermaphrodite. The shift to the use of the third person that immediately follows the statement thus produces a distance not from his identity, but rather between the speaking subject and this "other subject" as a way to protect a core sense of self from the workings of interpellations that are forced upon him through the injury of the name. By stopping him before he can finish saying "she," Lana participates in this act of protection and upholds Brandon's masculinity by confirming her attraction to him.

It has been argued that the movie represents Brandon's gender performance as relying for its survival on external validation. This view seems to be confirmed by the beginning of the movie, when Lonny tells Brandon he cannot date straight girls because he is not a boy, and he boldly retorts "Tell them that. They say I'm the best boyfriend they ever had," thus entrusting the truth about his gender identity to a linguistic performance by someone else. Focusing on his more consequential relationship with Lana, Halberstam (2005) similarly argues that the movie

makes the transgender subject dependent on the recognition of a woman. In other words, Brandon can be Brandon because Lana sees him as he sees himself (clothed, male, vulnerable, lacking, strong, and passionate), and she is willing to avert the gaze when his manhood is in question. (89)

Consequently, he continues, Lana's shift in the final part of the movie from understanding Brandon as a man with an ambiguously sexed body to seeing him as a masculine-presenting woman is interpreted by the critic as the film's disowning of the transgender subject and his gaze, a move whereby

Brandon is offered up as an 'everyman' hero who makes a claim on the audience's sympathies first by pulling off a credible masculinity, but then by seeming to step out of his carefully maintained manhood to appear before judge and jury in the naked flesh as female. (91)

Halberstam's acute reading of the movie's multilayered and unresolved attitude towards the transgender identity of its protagonist can be further complicated, however, by looking at how Brandon later in the movie linguistically forges a resistance to the social positionalities that are forced upon him by the workings of interpellative power. Such resistance is made possible by the very nature of interpellation, which has nothing to do with the truthfulness of the address it performs, and whose primary task, per Butler (1997, 34) is not description but rather the calling into social existence of a subject who is not bound by the terms of this constitutive address. The use of the third person to refer to a subjectivity he does not identify with signals therefore the opening of a space of resistance that allows Brandon to perceive and affirm himself outside the terms of the multiple interpellations addressing him, while at the same time acknowledging the power such calls exert on him by constituting a social positionality – for him and despite him – at odds with his self-perception. I read these third-person speeches as the linguistic equivalent of the split vision that in Halberstam's analysis instances the transgender gaze. Just as Brandon looks at himself from the outside, witnessing what John and Tom do to his body as they undress him to expose the truth society locates in his sexed anatomy, so does he speak of this "hermaphrodite" person who "is not quite a he" in the terms of a subjectivity that his identity is not sutured to, yet that he cannot fully escape. So, when Lana's capacity to see past gender binaries fails her, despite her awkward yet hurtful attempts to reposition him as a masculine-presenting girl she might feel attracted to, Brandon stays firm in his assertion of his masculinity even as the latter is subjected to the blows of Lana's hesitation and doubt. Swinging between an almost childlike enthusiasm at the idea of following him to Lincoln and the reluctance to act on such decision, Lana cannot help betraying the effect that the full knowledge of Brandon's body has on her perception of his gender: "Did you do somethin' to your hair?" she asks in one of the several moments in the final part of the movie in which she interpellates him as no longer fully male in her eyes.

Arguably the most wounding act of naming Brandon is subjected to comes when, a split second before John shoots him, Lana calls him “Teena”. This is the last word Brandon hears before dying and the last name by which he is called. Yet, paradoxically, it is not the last word or the last name the movie allows him to utter. Lana finds in fact a note in one of his pockets that he intended to leave with her and that we can imagine was penned at the hardest of moments, when, following a brutal rape and an equally brutal interrogation by police, he realizes that the girl he loves is not ready to follow him as he tries to escape the threat of future violence by his assaulters. We hear the short letter being read in voice-over by Brandon as Lana eventually drives away from Falls City, the last words spoken by one of the movie’s characters:

Dear Lana,
by the time you read this, I’ll be back home in Lincoln.
I’m scared of what’s ahead, but when I think of you... I know I’ll be able to go on.
...
I’ll be waitin’ for ya.
Love always and forever.
Brandon.

In signing himself with his male name as he prepares to go back to Lincoln – that is to say not simply “home” but the place where he responded to the insuppressible address of masculinity – Brandon posthumously empties Lana’s last call with a final speech act that witnesses to the potential for subversion and resistance afforded by the very inauguration of the subject within the constraining conditions of language. Such potential, however, is not, and cannot be, fully realized exclusively by claiming illocutionary power to gender self-affirmation since language does not constitute an autonomous, self-sufficient sphere that functions outside the workings of disputed notions of identity to produce binding effects on social reality. As Brandon’s violent death indicates, the performative quality of gendered speech acts must rather be understood as the contested territory of competing acts of interpellations out of which subjectivity arises.

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