

Television's Transgender Tipping Point

“*Her Story*: Representing Transgenderism in the Web Series”

Sarah E. S. Sinwell, *University of Utah*

Theorists of queer media have often pointed to the underground nature of queerness. Historically, queerness on television could be seen in minor roles on soap operas such as *All My Children* (ABC, 1970-2011) and *The Bold and the Beautiful* (CBS, 1987-2013), teen television shows such as *Degrassi* (CTV, 2001-present) and *Glee* (Fox, 2009-2015), or crime series such as *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* (NBC, 1999-present) and *CSI* (CBS, 2000-2015). However, recently, representations of transgenderism have become more and more omnipresent on contemporary television as the popularity of *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013-present), *Transparent* (Amazon, 2014-present), and *Sense8* (Netflix, 2015-present) attest. Laverne Cox's role as Sophia in *Orange is the New Black* and Mya Taylor's role as Alexandra in *Tangerine* (Sean Baker, 2015) are evidence that trans actors are now even getting recognized in the media industry for Emmys and Independent Spirit Awards. In this essay, I explore the current transgender web series, *Her Story* (Sydney Freeland, 2015) as a means of further examining how representations of transgenderism can be understood in popular culture.

Following in the footsteps of the It Gets Better Project of 2010, web series such as *Eden's Garden* (Seven King, 2015), *Crave* (Aneesh Sheth, 2015), *Brothers* (Emmett Lundberg, 2015) and *Her Story* attempt to explore the constantly evolving meanings of transgender identity within contemporary culture. Pursuing stories of relationships that question the construction of queer identity as camp or kitsch, these series incorporate narratives of the self as a means of (re)defining sex, sexuality, and queerness.

Questioning ideas of hegemonic masculinity, femininity, homosexuality, and heteronormativity, these series also point to the ways in which our own cultural ideas of homosexuality and heterosexuality are informed by cultural norms about gender, able-bodiedness, and whiteness.

Investigating terms such as queer, gay, lesbian, butch, dyke, androgynous, gender queer, transgender, monogamous, etc., these trans web series also explore how ideas of accessibility, narrativity, and community are tied in with understandings of queer sexuality. Exploring the ways in which femininity, masculinity, homosexuality, and heteronormativity are often understood as invisible categories within dominant cultural discourse, these web series also examine how current concerns about queerness and homophobic media practices are both manifested in and critiqued in contemporary television.

Nominated for an Emmy in the newly created category of Outstanding Short Form Comedy or Drama and co-written and produced by two transgender actresses, Jen Richards and Angelica Ross, *Her Story* focuses on the dating lives of trans women. The only independent web series nominated in that category, the series is evidence of how non-traditional media platforms enable undiscovered stories about transgender identity to be told. Investigating such questions as “How to ask if someone is transgendered?” and “How is transgenderism linked to activism?” the series is revolutionary in terms of its representation.

First, *Her Story* represents trans lives and experiences outside of the context of transition. Second, trans careers, relationships, and experiences are represented as complex and linked to other ideas of class, race, gender, nationality and ability, and not

only to questions of sexuality. And, finally, in addition to being written, directed, produced and performed by queer people, most of the cast and crew of the series also identify as LGBTQ and the series includes a number of queer people of color. The series' focus on authenticity and insistence that trans people play trans characters is also significant within current media representations of trans identities. As producer/director/writer/actor Jen Richards notes, *Her Story* is a collaboration between trans women and queer cis women. This also pushes the boundaries of what is expected in terms of trans and LGBTQ representation both on and off the screen.

In this context, I am interested in further examining these web series as a space for building queer community. By investigating web series as queer community spaces, I argue that we may also explore how ideas of accessibility, narrativity, and privacy function as a means of creating alternative and queer viewing modes online. Queer web series construct queer online communities via video sharing, while non-traditional media platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo enable even more possibilities for rethinking transgender and queer sexualities and spaces since they function outside the realms of industrial spaces such as Netflix and Amazon. In this way, I argue, these web series reimagine the relationships between sexuality, the self, and the other, as a means of further exploring the construction of queerness in contemporary media culture.

Biography: Sarah E. S. Sinwell is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Film and Media Arts at the University of Utah. She has published essays on *Being John Malkovich*, *Green Porno* and cell phone culture in *Film and Sexual Politics*, *Women's Studies Quarterly* and *In Media Res*. Her research examines shifting modes of independent film

distribution and exhibition on YouTube, Hulu, Netflix and the Sundance Channel website as a means of redefining independent cinema in an era of media convergence.