ASHLEY HOLLKAMP’S ESSAY FOR LAREN McCLUNG’S “ADVANCED COLLEGE ESSAY” ANALYZES THE FILM BOYS DON’T CRY TO BREAK DOWN ITS COMPLEX PERSPECTIVE ON TRANSGENDER IDENTITY AND THE CYCLES OF HATE AND VIOLENCE THAT OFTEN SURROUND IT. INTERVIEWS FROM THE DIRECTOR AND SCHOLARLY ARTICLES IN GENDER STUDIES ALLOW HOLLKAMP TO BRING THE MOVIE TO LIFE.

FRAGILE CONCEPTIONS: EXAMINING CONSTRUCTIONS OF GENDER AND MASCULINITY

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Thunder claps in the distance and mixes with indecipherable shouting as the camera focuses on a static shot of a trailer park. Suddenly, a young man rounds the corner and rushes into the trailer on the right side of the frame. Inside, he locks the door and closes all the windows; outside, we see a group of men following close behind, chasing him. Their enraged shouts, a harsh mixture of slurs and profanity, become clear. The men pound on the flimsy trailer door insistently, threatening to knock it down. Inside the trailer, we are introduced to Lonny, the boy’s cousin. As the boy attempts to explain that he has no idea “what went wrong,” the camera pans to Lonny, who throws him up against the wall and grabs him by the collar, shaking him as he shouts: “You are not a boy! That is what went wrong! You are not a boy! . . . Why don’t you just admit that you’re a dyke?” (Boys Don’t Cry). Upon hearing this, the boy abruptly pulls himself from Lonny’s grip and steps away. The camera zooms in on his steely expression. The shouting stops momentarily as he looks Lonny in the eye and replies “because I’m not a dyke” (Boys Don’t Cry). The tense moment is interrupted as glass shatters against the outside of the trailer and the men outside continue to threaten him. “You’re not crashing here anymore, Teena. Get your stuff and go,” we hear Lonny say off-camera just before the scene fades (Boys Don’t Cry).
Filmmaker Kimberly Peirce wastes no time when it comes to introducing us to the reality of life in 1993 Nebraska for her protagonist, a young transgender man, in her directorial debut *Boys Don’t Cry*. After being kicked out of the trailer, we see Teena in a bar, where he befriends a girl named Candace. “I’m Brandon,” he tells her, leaving behind his Teena identity and reinventing himself into the character we will come to know throughout the film (*Boys Don’t Cry*). Based on the true story of Brandon Teena, a transgender man born Teena Brandon, the film explores the final weeks of Brandon’s life, from his move to Candace’s tiny, rural hometown of Falls City, to the tragic chain of events that lead to his rape and ultimate murder at the hands of John Lotter and Tom Nissen. John and Tom—who, along with Candace and Lana, Brandon’s eventual girlfriend, form the core cast of the film—befriend Brandon, allowing him to finally feel a true sense of acceptance and belonging for the first time in his life. This lasts until they discover that he is transgender, at which point they betray him. While this may sound like the plot of a typical melodramatic made-for-TV film, Peirce elevates the film to something more—a revealing examination of a culture of violence and discrimination, a political statement.

It was April 1994, a few months after Brandon’s murder, that Peirce, then a graduate film student at Columbia University, first learned about him through a *Village Voice* article. In an interview with *The A.V. Club*, she recalls feeling an “immediate kinship” with him (Tobias). She grew concerned as the story became more and more sensationalized—people seemed to be focused on the crime itself, without giving it any “emotional understanding” (qtd. in Allen). This seemed like a very dangerous simplification to Peirce, stating that “in duplicating any sort of hate crime . . . you have a responsibility to figure out moment by moment what was motivating this violence to happen, keep it personal, keep it up close, keep it dramatic” (qtd. in Allen). And so, with *Boys Don’t Cry*, Peirce set out to humanize the villains and investigate the cultural factors that made them into people who would commit such a violent hate crime. At the heart of this investigation is masculinity, and the film serves as an in-depth look into the role of society in constructing ideas of masculinity, as well as
the role masculinity plays in hate crimes like the one that killed Brandon.

In one of his first interactions with his future girlfriend, Lana, Brandon buys her beer and walks her home from the gas station in Falls City. While they walk, Lana complains about living in such a small town where there’s nothing to do and questions Brandon why he went bumper-skiing with John and Tom, considering it an idiotic activity. “I just thought that’s what guys do around here,” Brandon shrugs (Boys Don’t Cry). This line gives us insight into Brandon’s attitude toward masculinity. As a transman who is successfully passing for the first time, his view of masculinity is malleable and constantly evolving. Brandon is searching for acceptance as a guy in Falls City, and the best way he knows of achieving that is by blending in, imitating the guys he sees. John and Tom have taken Brandon under their wing, so he goes along with whatever they do, and as a result he receives their acceptance and approval—at least initially.

In his article “Part of the Package,” author Jamison Green states that “masculinity comes from a person’s ability to correlate his or her behaviors and/or actions with those expected from people with male bodies” (296). He notes that this definition changes based on “cultural understandings of maleness,” so it looks different in Falls City than in New York City, for example (296). Falls City is a small, lower class, Midwestern town without a lot of diversity, and it’s interesting how these factors play into the gender dynamics here. Qualities that could be considered part of the ‘traditional’ gender role for men, such as strength, protectiveness, and confidence, seem to be taken to the extreme by Tom and John. These two men are aggressive, domineering, and manipulative—they are violent and emotionally unstable characters, always straddling the line between charming and off-putting. Both men have spent time in prison and suffer from anger management issues, and their upbringings inform their ideas about masculinity. In one scene, after Lana and Brandon have begun dating, John confronts Lana about what she sees in Brandon. Even though he counts Brandon as one of his ‘buddies’ at this point, John still considers himself to be a better example of a man, and therefore a better boyfriend for Lana. “I know he’s nice and everything, but he’s kind of a wuss,” he tells her (Boys Don’t Cry). In an attempt to defend
Brandon, Lana replies “I know he’s no big he-man like you. There’s just something about him” (Boys Don’t Cry). This scene illuminates John’s narrow view of masculinity, as informed by his own cultural understanding and personal experiences—all the men he has ever known in Falls City are extremely macho and aggressive, and since Brandon is not, John discounts Brandon’s version of masculinity. Green emphasizes that “female-to-male (FTM) transgendered . . . individuals . . . do not follow the traditional prescriptive paths to maleness, yet they often possess an undeniable masculinity” (291). However, what we see throughout the film is a suppression and denial of Brandon’s “alternative masculinit[y]” by John and other male characters (Green 293).

What Peirce exemplifies through John’s disregard for Brandon’s masculinity in this film is the concept of “hegemonic masculinity;” in an article titled “Accomplishing Masculinity through Anti-Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Homicide: A Comparative Case Study Approach,” authors Kristin Kelley and Jeff Gruenewald define this concept as “a form of dominant masculinity that when enacted further subordinates all other masculinities and femininities” (6). Kelley and Gruenewald argue that “an effort to . . . ‘do’ hegemonic masculinity [is] at the heart of anti-LGBT crimes,” because “the victims of bias crimes are antithetical to the ‘hegemonic ideal’ of manhood which emphasizes aggressiveness, competitiveness, risk-taking, and other similar qualities” (6). It’s interesting that Peirce’s male characters seem to embody these exact characteristics—but upon further consideration, it’s likely this wasn’t accidental.

Peirce was painstakingly intentional in the construction of Boys Don’t Cry. She spent four years conducting research before shooting even began (Tobias). This research included spending time in Falls City, where she attended the murder trials, visited the room in which Brandon was executed, and hung out at the local convenience store, just as we see Lana and Brandon do in the film (Tobias). Peirce explains that she focused on “find[ing] the underlying emotional truth” of the story, and constructed the film based on what scenes were pivotal to the viewers’ understanding of that truth (Tobias). She aimed to make each character “somebody everyone can enter into” (Tobias). For this reason, she spends about two-thirds of the film
simply developing Brandon’s relationships with the residents of Falls City, allowing us to get a feel for the inner workings of each character. Peirce strives to draw out the nuances of this story, to make the viewer understand that Brandon’s life was complicated, that John and Tom’s lives were complicated, and that this crime was complicated, too. Film critic Roger Ebert writes in his review that Peirce “sees Tom and John not as simple killers but as the instruments of deep ignorance and inherited anti-social pathology” (Ebert). Every small detail of the film is carefully chosen to add to our understanding of this culture in which John and Tom have been raised. We watch as Lana’s face flushes with embarrassment when Brandon visits her house and they find her drunk mother (the only adult figure in the film) passed out on the couch (Boys Don’t Cry). We watch as all of the characters gather in Lana’s living room for Brandon’s birthday party (Boys Don’t Cry). We watch as Tom tells Brandon that he and John used to cut themselves all the time in lock-up, in order to “get control of this thing inside of [them]” (Boys Don’t Cry). All of these moments give us a sense of the depressing, damaging reality of life in Falls City. Peirce doesn’t reduce John and Tom to shallow villains—instead, she allows us to see them the way Brandon initially did, as understandable, charismatic, funny people. Peirce states that “there wouldn’t be much drama if they were going to kill him right up front. The drama is that he got seduced into thinking he might be safe and created a family out of them” (qtd. in Tobias). The effect of this meticulous character development is profound—it’s what makes the film so potent.

Had Peirce simply depicted John and Tom as violent villains without any relatable human qualities, it would be easy to write this story off as irrelevant. Oh, how sad that such crazy criminals exist. But, of course, I don’t relate to them—they are nothing like me or anyone I know. Peirce wants us to think twice before making that assumption. Because the truth is that John and Tom are humans, just like any of us. They have similar stories to many of the other men in Falls City: violent tendencies, drug and alcohol abuse problems, all a product of damaging upbringings and a particular environment. In some respects, John and Tom are like people you have met; perhaps, even, they are people like yourself. And before they committed these crimes, their friends would’ve denied they were capable of it. They are
not isolated monsters, and this is not an isolated issue. This is where the “emotional truth” that Peirce works so carefully to cultivate hits us (Tobias). She presents the characters of John and Tom without demonizing them—the film facilitates a deep understanding of the struggles these men have faced. Because of that, we are able to have a degree of empathy for them, to understand the factors that could have led them to commit the crimes that they did, even though we don’t agree or approve.

As much as Peirce’s filmmaking enables us to empathize, we still struggle to grasp why John and Tom’s upbringings and experiences lead them to commit the horrific crimes that they do. This seemingly incomprehensible question of ‘why?’ is exactly what Kelley and Gruenewald attempt to answer through their research. They note that violent crime situations arise from attempts on the offenders’ part to “reproduce [their] own masculine identity, in addition to policing the perceived subordinate masculine identities of other men” (Kelley and Gruenewald 7). When John and Tom discover that Brandon is trans, they immediately become enraged because they see Brandon as a threat. Their own cultural understandings tell them that ‘real men’ can only be the violent, aggressive, hyper-masculine people they have been exposed to in Falls City, in prison, etc. As producer Christine Vachon insists, the film “is not just about two stupid thugs who killed somebody. It’s about these guys whose world is so tenuous and so fragile that they can’t stand to have any of their beliefs shattered” (qtd. in Maslin). This, ultimately, is why John and Tom are driven to rape and murder Brandon—they are insecure and feel the need to reassert their dominance and power. They instinctually turn to violence, as that is their cultural conception of ‘problem-solving,’ considering that aggression is part of the hegemonic ideal of masculinity (Kelley and Gruenewald 6).

Additionally, Kelley and Gruenewald explain that there are generally two scenarios of anti-LGBT violence: “The first scenario consist[s] of attacks between people, usually men, [occurring] in a public space and . . . often ‘marked by a tone of outrage,’ whereas the second violent scenario [is] more confrontational in nature and typically occur[s] in private” (7). Interestingly, we see both of these scenarios
unfold in *Boys Don't Cry*, which serves to solidify the link between the violence and John and Tom’s senses of masculinity.

In the most brutal scene of the film, we watch as, right after Brandon is exposed as transgender, an enraged John and Tom force him into their car and drive to an empty lot. “You know you brought this on yourself, Teena,” John says as he drags Brandon out of the car and proceeds to punch him (*Boys Don’t Cry*). It’s worth noting that John refers to Brandon by his birth name here, Teena, in order to further strip him of his masculinity. John diverts the blame onto Brandon because, in his mind, sexually violating Brandon is justified—he is simply reclaiming the inherent dominance his own cultural conceptions of maleness have led him to believe he is entitled to, while subordinating Brandon’s ‘alternative’ version of masculinity. John and Tom are angry at Brandon for what they consider to be his ‘deception’—they feel threatened by his successful performance of masculinity, and the only way they know to get ‘revenge’ is to humiliate and degrade Brandon as they do here. This is how fragile their conceptions of masculinity are—this simple realization about Brandon turns their world upside down and in their minds, violence is the only way to regain control.

The scene where John rapes Brandon is depicted in quick flashes: Brandon’s head hits the car seat, John pulls his pants off, John climbs on top of him, we see Brandon’s bloodied, anguished face as he cries and attempts to squirm away. In between each of these flashes, we return to shots of Brandon at the police station; while he reports the rape, the flashes come as he remembers the rape during this interview. Peirce states that this was the only way she could depict this rape; in real-time, the scene wouldn’t have been effective, because “Brandon doesn’t want to remember the rape” (Tobias). And so what we see are the fragments that remain seared into his consciousness, the moments he can’t forget despite all efforts.

Peirce’s depiction of the rape is made all the more powerful through the counterpart police station scenes, where Brandon is mercilessly interrogated and stripped of his masculinity by a male officer. “I can’t believe that he pulled your pants down and that, if you are female, he didn’t stick his hand in ya or his finger in ya,” the officer presses him (*Boys Don’t Cry*). Brandon protests: “I don’t know what
this has to do with what happened,” as the officer continues to harass him about his gender identity (Boys Don’t Cry). The officer asks: “Why do you run around with guys, bein’ you’re a girl yourself? Why do you go around kissin’ girls?” (Boys Don’t Cry). In the span of just four minutes, Peirce manages to serve blow after blow, both physically and mentally, to Brandon, but she refuses to reduce him to the victim—even after all of this, he picks himself back up and attempts to recover his identity.

What Boys Don’t Cry shows us is a world full of prejudices, a world where hegemonic masculinity underscores all relations, a world where every character is imperfect, a mix of good and bad qualities—in other words, the film portrays reality. New York Times reviewer Janet Maslin commends Peirce for her ability to portray “profanity, nudity, frank sexual situations, violence and rape without seeming lurid in the least.” Truly, nothing in the film is gratuitous, as everything contributes to the construction of Brandon’s specific reality. We’re meant to come away from the film shocked by the normalcy and realism, by the realization that this actually happened. Maslin’s article is titled “Sometimes Accepting an Identity Means Accepting a Fate, Too,” and this hints at the dichotomy the film ultimately leaves us to grapple with: if society is opposed to their identity, can a person ever truly be themselves without also being in danger?

For Brandon and thousands of other trans people who continue to be murdered because they don’t conform to normative gender roles, the answer, horribly enough, seems to be no. In a strange paradox, Boys Don’t Cry is as specific as it is universal because—although the film is focused solely on Brandon’s narrative—the “emotional truth” at its core remains very relatable (Tobias). Brandon’s story inadvertently speaks to the stories of many other LGBT people. Take, for example, Matthew Shepard. As a website run by the Matthew Shepard Foundation outlines, Matthew was a young gay man who was brutally tortured and murdered by two homophobic men in the small Midwestern town of Laramie, Wyoming in October of 1998, right around the filming of Boys Don’t Cry (“Matthew’s Story”). And the film remains relevant today, as crimes continue to be perpetrated against LGBT-identifying individuals. Just a few months ago, on March 26, 2016, a transgender woman was raped by a heterosexual
man in the bathroom of a New York City bar, the New York Post reports (Cohen and Prendergast). Anti-LGBT violence is not just a problem of the 1990s Midwest—after all, poor, dysfunctional communities are hardly unique to Nebraska. The circumstances that shaped John and Tom’s conceptions of masculinity—poverty, drugs, alcohol, family instability, lack of social mobility, etc.—exist all over the country, even in cities labeled as ‘progressive,’ like New York. These locations are not as diametric as they seem—in the end, we are all humans struggling with similar issues. No matter where we live, the truth in Brandon’s story hits home.

Within Brandon’s story is a statement: he wound up “paying a terrible price” for simply attempting to be himself, a price he never should have had to pay (Maslin). Peirce simply depicts the story and lets it speak for itself. She doesn’t present us with a solution—because there isn’t one—but she paves the way for a discussion, for action, for change, or for, at the very least, some degree of reflection about how problematic our society and its values are. It’s too late to save Brandon, but it’s not too late to learn from him.

WORKS CITED


