

JUMP CUT

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Queer and trans filmmaking: a new pedagogy

by [Beck Banks](#) / [Miche Dreiling](#)

Interview with Joëlle Rouleau

Beck Banks

I'm a PhD candidate in Media Studies at the University of Oregon with a focus on transgender media. In particular, I look at rural trans media activists and the work that they're doing in the field, especially the region in which I grew up, Central Appalachia. I also research trans media representation and the limitations of representation. I've been making some short films and collaborating with the people whose activism I research as well as making shorts with Miche. This creating and collaboration seems to have gone hand in hand with my research as I'm becoming more of a maker.

Miche Dreiling

I am a PhD candidate in Media Studies at the University of Oregon, with a certificate in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. My research is in the area of non-binary gender. Specifically, I'm looking at driver's licenses and the X marker for non-binary that Oregon started using in 2017 (Oregon was the first state to allow people to designate themselves as non-binary on their license). I'm looking at folks' experiences with that new gender marker. I also make documentary films to go along with my research, so I'm a scholar and practitioner.

Joëlle Rouleau

All right, so let's jump into our conversation. What is creation like for you? What does it mean?

BB

This question is so big. I love it for that. Interestingly, the further I got into my PhD studies, the more I enjoyed cooking because I was able to do something with my hands. And I realized I could do so many more things with my hands other than just cook, especially since I was teaching production classes. Miche and I have been co-teaching a production class together for three summers now.

I think it was after that first summer co-teaching when we started talking about collaborating, and then the second one when we made work together. I like creating on my own, too, but large scale creation doesn't work that way. It takes more people. I am constantly sitting around thinking through project and film ideas, but there's a next step, and collaborating can create the momentum needed to take it. Collaboration makes people accountable to one another. It produces ideas and outcomes that are greater than the people involved. As it stands, higher ed does not usually promote a scholar-practitioner approach. We're often not trained in or encouraged to do it.

MD

Even when we make things on our own, we're never really on our own. We stand on the shoulders of other creators and other scholars. Creation means collaboration for me too, which I think makes Beck and I a good team. The way that I usually approach creation is to allow myself space to tap into curiosity about things I observe in the world or encounter or read about. It's similar to the way that I formulate research ideas. Just start asking questions! With research, you read the literature, you figure out your theoretical approach and methods, but with filmmaking, it's just seeing what's out there in the world and doing it on a broader level than just from the academic ivory tower. When I'm in that scholar-practitioner mode, I balance these processes and they inform one another. But in some of the more creative projects that Beck and I have worked on together, I get to just be a practitioner, which means making stuff and telling cool stories with awesome people.

JR

To me, any research project is creative because you are following leads and curiosity and instinct. And you are driven by an energy for "finding something." Creation allows for stories or ideas that are not necessarily valued in research to be explored. And I guess that's one of the reasons why I do research-creation. It's my own way to queer research and to have the attitude, "Up yours, I'm going to do something else."

BB

I love that! That's amazing. Telling stories that haven't been told is something Miche and I are really invested in. Of course, you can sit down and research representation or its limitations for a long time. But if you don't ask, "Hey, what can I do to fix that?" that's a problem. My creation often tries to present a solution to what I've been researching. Research leads to more creativity, too. I wrote a short story a couple of years ago, just on a whim; when I first started working on it, I started researching. So I start with, "I have this vague idea," and then it continues to develop. You're throwing more ideas into yourself and therefore more come out. Just a matter of editing from there.

JR

You've mentioned it twice now, so let's go there: What are the limits / limitations to representations?

BB

I think I am using that concept because I have an article coming out about trans masculine visibility on the screen—which is not really there or wasn't for there a long time. Since there has been more representation in mainstream media of trans people, violence has increased towards trans women of color. So investigating that representation starts getting into a tricky and dire area. For example, how can representation be done well and with respect? Do we understand what's happening with certain representations and the consequences? Trans people may be seen as more of a threat because of more representation. Yet representation, as Laverne Cox noted, doesn't fix problems as much as it may set us on the path to telling stories that can create more empathy, bring progress. That means that we really need to be having people with a trans perspective telling those stories because too often we've seen how people get objectified, used as furniture for telling stories. It's unethical.

JR

That is a very interesting and important point to make. Representation was discussed in the 90s as something that you wanted at all cost—whether bad or good, we don't really care as long as we talk about our lives—because that was our main challenge. One of the limitations that you've mentioned is very important, but I also think we must consider another fact: there's no such thing as good or bad representations. They are just exposing some social condition and moving all the time, and their reception depends on which circle you are in. If you've never seen a representation of a trans person, this can be your “Hallelujah moment,” you know, it might actually save your life; but also that same representation can also be dooming your possibility, your life possibility. It's complicated territory.

BB

Let me go back for a moment. The day that Caitlyn Jenner *Vogue* cover appeared, I had about 40 people stop by my desk at my workplace and tell me that they stand with me in solidarity. I wasn't out, or at least I thought I wasn't, gender-wise. I didn't fully understand myself, and my utter lack of closets. So it helped me along those lines, to understand myself through other people.

But later that day, I had a cop follow me for several blocks in a really menacing way. I walked into a store and had to run out like the side door just because I felt a threat. That day was a microcosm of the ripple effects of representation. The best thing representation can do is give people insight into themselves, and that might provide them with knowledge to be able to reach out and form a supportive community, feel agency in their lives. If that happens through these creations that we are talking about, if they are queer/trans based, that's just one more way to help form that community.

MD

Yeah, I think that representation for representation's sake is something to be mindful about because it follows a film industry, Hollywood, that's based on toxic heteronormativity. If these stories aren't informed by people who have the experiences and perspective behind the stories that are being told, then that lack is what will be reproduced. And that leaves out women, people of color, queer, trans people, disabled people and all the intersections of these plus class. Or it will lead to further misunderstanding about what these things mean and then that's another barrier for folks to overcome, both in terms of shaping their own identity and in understanding their community. Stories told in one-dimensional ways can be harmful.

JR

That leads into my second question. How can we have multi-dimensional representations or creation? And I'm guessing one of the ways is through queer and trans perspectives. But what does that mean to you?

BB

I think it's more than about labor or representation, I think it's about audience. Often queer, trans material appears in media made for cis, straight people, and we all feel and see that, time and time again. It's the bulk of the stuff that you see in the mainstream. If I ask, “Does really strong trans, queer work make it to the mainstream much?” the answer is no.

MD

I've long meditated on what a trans or queer gaze is to me as I thought about it in an academic but not experiential way. So as a filmmaker what I try to do in terms of a queer gaze is turn the gaze backward and inward at viewers. It requires them to be aware of the medium itself, and then also feel some sort of empathy and look inward—that's at the heart of what trans and queer filmmaking means to me. In my work, this tends to manifest itself as humor, which I didn't actually realize until I went back to think about this question. For instance, in Beck's and my film *The Coffee Name Game*, there was an outtake, a scene in which Beck is saying names over and over in a little montage. You (Beck) said “Marco” as one of the names and we all yelled “Polo!” It was a funny moment on set and encapsulated all the fun we were having making this film about trans self-discovery. And so I put that scene after the credits in the final cut because I think it's important for people who are watching the media to recognize that this work was made by real people with unique perspectives.

JR

Going back to Laura Mulvey—as viewers we are trying to forget that we are in a film, basically. That's the idea, right? It's the idea that we forget we're in the film so that we go with it and we follow it and we engage with it. But if we look back at the New Queer Cinema in the

beginning of the 90s, the whole idea was to actually break that spell, break that connection that we had with the film as an audience. And I totally agree with that idea, especially now since we are always mediated through images. Specifically, within the pandemic because everything's on Zoom and with our phones, our social media, Instagram, Twitter. It's always a mediation of some sort. I know that's not true for everybody, but we have a common culture of self-mediation through social media. And we forget this media is an action, it is a performance. We are putting ourselves in the real world through a mode of representation. And you raise a very interesting question too: How to queer that? And humor ... humor is dangerous.

MD

I think another function of humor is that it serves to lift the veil a little bit and let people lower their guards. And it also lowers the bar for queer folks out there to see that real people are doing this media making; real people are making things and having fun doing it. It took me until my mid-20s to realize that I could tell stories this way. That no one was standing at some gate or was going to stop me from making films—I could do this. Because of that, I want that bar lowered so that every person who has a story can tell it or feel like that's an option available to them.

JR

Make it more accessible.

MD

Yeah.

JR

Let's talk about your latest film. What were the biggest challenges that you faced as queer and trans filmmakers?

BB

You know, I ended up doing fieldwork with a group of trans people who were making a documentary in central Appalachia on trans health care. And I would say one of the biggest problems we had was money. I was along for the ride and then all the sudden I was a part of it. Because I can't divorce those things in my life. God, there's so much that you do within your life as a trans or queer person to divorce yourself from the world around you. All of a sudden I'm setting up the equipment and then I'm doing the interviews. It just happened very naturally, and we're still in touch and talking about "Well, what if we get some more funding." It would be fantastic. That's why I brought the project to Miche so we would try to co-produce and rework some of that film for release. I think everybody can say their project needs funding.

Another obstacle would be Covid. It really derailed a lot of plans right now. I can't justify getting on a plane. I can't justify interviewing people about health care during this period. That's just not going to happen.

And I understand a lot of people need to protect themselves. For that particular documentary, we put out a lot of calls for participants and I started noticing that most of the people who volunteered to be interviewed were white. That really limits the stories that we are able to tell, but I also understand why so many of those who stepped up are white. Rural trans people are facing a lot but there is another layer of issues for trans people of color in that area if they are visible or allow for the documentation of their lives. Telling stories of all the people is difficult for us because of access but also because of the need to make sure that people are safe. It is a risk to have a documentary about a trans person in a rural area at all. That could apply to urban areas as well...but it is different.

JR

There's transphobia, racism and homophobia everywhere, but I understand what you mean. Also, I guess in urban settings we have a feeling that we're close to other people, we are close to services, whereas in rural environments, it feels remote. It feels far away, feels like there's nobody out there.

BB

And when I met that documentary crew—they live in a rural area—I realized I was one of the few new people they would be meeting that year. I understood how special that is as a trans person, too. So traveling together for 15 days for the doc, even though it was on a very serious subject, I felt a sense of joy that I really hope that everybody who is trans gets to experience. Just being with a group of people who share a similar identity, even though they may have wildly different politics and viewpoints, has something incredibly comforting about it. It's transformative and ... I think that film making and other creative collaborations are one more way to be in community.

JR

On a more personal level, are you from a rural background?

BB

Actually both of us are from rural backgrounds ... I'm from East Tennessee, a small town, so I am originally from Appalachia.

MD

I grew up on a farm in rural Kansas so I'm really cognizant of the ways that people get out of those sorts of lives; I think for me, knowledge and creativity were the ways out. I definitely feel that sense of rural isolation that you are talking about.

BB

I think that isolation makes representation and its surrounding issues all the more important for me. It made the screen a lifeline. I imagine you all may have had the same experience if you're doing this kind of work; you start to understand how valuable media representation is when you are young. For example, when the *Celluloid Closet* came out, which is dating myself a little, I may have watched it 20 times within a couple of weeks. (laughs)

MD

Those queer readings come early! I think innately when we see stories that are similar in some way to the way that we feel, we gravitate toward that.

JR

Talking about representations being a lifeline: we're hungry for them. We need them. But paradoxically they are limiting, dangerous. It's a very tricky to find a balance within representation. How do you, from a filmmaking perspective, engage with that difficult question? You said, earlier Miche, you are trying to include showing the film being made but is that the only technique? Are there any other ways to do this?

MD

It isn't necessarily a technique but more of an approach. I think media that unapologetically allows queer and trans folks to just be is important. They should not have to be 'the trans person' or 'the queer person' in the story and that be their whole identity. I am also a parent and the media that my son consumes is markedly different from what we're used to. What I'm seeing is that there's media available to him that shows non-binary gender examples in a way that was never possible when I was his age. I think that the most successful stories allow people to be just themselves first, and then tell stories of them as holistic characters operating in situations.

JR

As a parent, as an audience member and as a filmmaker, how would you describe differences between media? Because this special issue focuses on queer television, but it actually opens up to queer media because, what is television nowadays? It's a very interesting broad conversation, but would you say there's a difference between queer television and film? You said there's a difference between what your son watches and what you had access to at his age. Is it the same for everything?

MD

That's a really good question. I think that the distinction is becoming more blurred. I mean, I think there's a class distinction at work between film and TV. Television has historically been the "every person's" media and film is something that is associated with high cinema, high art. It's elevated as, you know, highbrow—in the same way that literature and journalism are distinct from one another. And that distinction is becoming lessened by streaming media. As an example, I actually am not sure that my son really sees a difference between movies and TV. For him, TV is like a bite-size pieces of a longer story. For documentary storytelling, which is what I do most of the time, there's a sweet spot in there where we have these docu-series that are an hour each and you've got seven of them that tell a bigger story through many small lenses. We need to question some of these format distinctions in the current moment, especially those rooted in class.

JR

Let's go on about that. I think that the key difference that existed between film and TV before still exists, but now between "complex TV" like *Game of Thrones* and more soapy TV, perhaps like *This Is Us*. There is a world of differences between those two types of television shows and they are class-related and they are related to funding. Would that distinction affect your practice? Is that change in media and film taken into account when you're filming?

BB

Mostly I consider streaming when I think TV, movies. It's all falling together especially for younger generations, but nobody ever talks about "independent" television. I guess that makes me a film person with my media making and more of a researcher interested television. TV is so rich as I watch to see what happens when people go back to it time and time again, what compels them, the giant story arcs that happen on TV.

MD

I think media makers' approach changes in a really practical way. How long do I have to tell the story? How long do I have to grab people's attention to get them invested, and then tell a story that's going to shift their perspective in some way? I have a communication background and see projects as an opportunity to persuade in a certain way, right? All communication aims at persuading us in some way or another. And so, I think when you're talking about this distinction in format between television and film, as a creator I sort of see a benefit in having 10 hours to tell a story, ten hours to sit with my audience and really give rich details and examples. Over that space of time, I could let folks tell their story in a way that could connect with the audience rather than try to tell a big story in an hour or two hours, which is usually the big challenge of filmmaking.

JR

This brings us back to the limits of representation: having time makes it possible to communicate more complex trans identity, trans realities. It makes you go beyond "passing or not" and viewers' basic problematic curiosity. This is the classic first stop of trans representation. I have a feeling that having time might lead to more complex storytelling. But Beck, you still go for film. So, in your practice what can film offer?

BB

I want to make something that could stand on its own instead of having to go through the massive process that it takes to do things for television. But that process might be breaking down as well. For example, on the Amazon channel, when they show an episode or two or YouTube series. We might be getting into seeing strong, independent television as a byproduct of streaming. We're even seeing changes in formats as U.S. television replicates the format of British mini-series—using film length in the TV format. So there seems to be a crumbling of barriers. Similarly, HBO has 20-minute documentaries. So maybe I can't say I'm solidly creating films. But for now, that's my instrument. Might be due to self-imposed limitations...

MD

I think Beck, you and I are on the same page more than it may appear.

BB

No, I think we should fight. (laughs)

MD

I have spent a lot of time thinking about availability of resources when it comes to media creation because the documentary is part of my dissertation. And so, I'm interviewing folks in Oregon, where I'm living. These were going to be in-person interviews, but now they're going to be conducted over Zoom. In practical terms, that means that the individuals have full autonomy over the framing of their shots, the equipment that they use, the way that they sort of represent themselves and how they create themselves and frame themselves in this film. I'm taking that as a really innovative, great thing. It may have come about due to Covid but I support handing over autonomy—sharing the privilege we have to make films and tell stories this way, and making that accessible to others. I'm really excited to talk with people about the way that they tell their stories through visual media. They have this rectangle and they can basically do whatever they want with it

Basically, as a filmmaker, I like handing over that power of framing to the people whose stories I want to get out into the world. Because I don't like feeling like I have too much power as researcher/filmmaker. I understand the power inherent in those relationships and the nuances around that, but I like facilitating folks telling their own stories in the way that they want to both visually and verbally.

JR

Thanks for that, it really makes sense with our goal of queering film practice. Would you have anything to add as a takeaway about queer and trans research and film practice?

BB

I'm glad that I got so much into production. I think that that was a gift that I got through the School of Journalism and Communication at University of Oregon through our Gateway to the Media class with Lisa Heyamoto, Lori Shontz, and Dan Morrison and by supporting Creative Strategies classes with Deb Morrison. In fact, I was teaching production before I started in a doctoral program, and I had some background in creating, too. But now, teaching labs where I am coaching people or critiquing productions has leveled me up. And, then I matched up with Mische, which is fantastic.

I wish that everybody got the opportunity to teach production-oriented courses, especially graduate students in media and communication studies or other social science and humanities programs. It's satisfying and just mentally comforting. I am able to move my work outside the academy by making something and actually use what I have been studying for so long. I will take it with me through my career so there's no way that I'll stop being a creator now.

Going back to our conversation earlier, it seems that there's a trope that queer people are only queer — all they are is queer. For example, I wrote an article, collaborating with a trans activist about a queer organization. We were invited by a journal to do this piece. After we turned it over to the journal, the feedback that we got from one reviewer was, "You didn't mention anything about being queer." Everything we were writing about was inherently queer. We didn't discuss being queer/trans and what that meant. Having to always spell it out is an odd thing, an objectification of sorts, a move toward totalizing. I think that social problem is one we see reflected in our media. These things play together, off of each other.

JR

It's true. And I think it's a limitation also to label something as queer or trans or to always have to go through this. It's another complicated relation because everything I do as a researcher is fueled by my experience. My experience is as a queer person. The separation between my public life and my personal life is quite blurred, but it isn't anyone else's business other than mine to decide where that border is, and in fact that border can move. Sometimes my professional life can be much more personal, like today for example when I've contacted you specifically to discuss queer and trans filmmaking. It's a personal choice, but it's also weird to have to push it on every front at all times. And it's frustrating sometimes too—that blurred line between personal and political.

MD

I think that, as a goal, I like to break down those distinctions because they don't seem to apply equally to folks who occupy that invisible norm, right? Straight people never have to talk about their experience as a straight filmmaker and white people never have to talk about their experience as a white filmmaker. I think that the distinctions between our personal and our private lives should be

self-directed, but also they are maybe not as important as they're made out to be by folks who never have to talk about their personal lives.

Our personal life factors so much into the way that we approach our research as well as the way that we approach our creative practice that separating the two just seems unnatural to me. And it represents yet another barrier for folks who can't separate or have a more difficult time separating their personal and private lives because of their personality, because of the way that they present to the world, because of a million other factors. I think that for me, a queer person who came from a rural background, the academy was my way out of that. College represented knowledge and it was a funnel for my creativity too, but then I had the experience of realizing that the academy was this exclusionary institution. So I sort of leaned back on my personal drive toward creativity. It has shown me that some of these distinctions themselves are driving some of the inequity that we see in institutions.

Personally, I would like to hear what drives people, I want to hear that personal side of things. That's what makes life interesting, right? Nobody wants to watch a movie about a person completely conforming to societal norms and not living their truth; nobody wants to watch a movie about that, it would be terrible. Basically, I think that the best stories come from folks who have interesting and different and queer things happen to them and are themselves interesting and different and queer and exist in the world. It's about more than representation; it's about telling stories that resonate with people.

JR

Your intervention makes me think about something and I'm testing, okay, the question might not work. Let's just give it a try. I'm assuming that you both read *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1991). Well, you know how Butler starts the book by questioning, "What is the subject of feminism?" She says that feminism's having to do with being a woman basically adds to the materialization of the oppression of the class of women and of gender norms. What if we try to do the same thing with queer and ask, "What would be the subject of queer?"

MD

Queer to me epitomizes weirdness. It's a way of being that's different from the societal norms we're often held to, and so it's not limited to people who identify as a queer person. But I do think that queer people are well positioned to tell queer stories because we have become aware of and identified our weirdness and the specific ways that we're different from the norm. We are the weirdos, so we're best suited to tell weird and interesting and queer stories.

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