



**Sparking Difficult Dialogues:
Sam Feder and Dean Spade on Trans Documentaries**



In 2006, *Boy I Am*—a feature-length documentary that looks at the experiences of three young trans people in New York City and features members of queer communities addressing questions not often discussed—began touring the United States. In this conversation, *Boy I Am*'s codirector and executive producer, Sam Feder, and trans activist Dean Spade, who appears in the film, talk about responsibility, representation, and the future of trans activism.

SF: I am eager to hear your thoughts about *Boy I Am*. As the filmmakers, [codirector/coproducer] Julie Hollar and I often hear positive feedback from people, but we don't hear anything critical. Part of our goal in making the doc was to spark difficult dialogues. We're talking about it, but not in the ways that we'd hoped for. So, bring it on.

DS: I saw the finished version of *Boy I Am* at the University of Southern California in fall 2006 when I spoke on a panel about the film with Jack Halberstam (who also appears in the film). I really appreciated how you and Julie responded to some of the concerns brought up in early screenings by adding new footage to balance the views in the film.

But seeing the film in its entirety brought up a host of new concerns for me. My biggest concern is how the film centralizes surgery. The three central characters all take testosterone and have chest surgery. The more work I do in the community, the more I feel like the most dangerous myth about trans people is not only that we all have surgery but also that our identities are defined by those surgeries. This misunderstanding is reflected in some of the most discriminatory policies and laws about us, and in day-to-day discriminatory behavior. For example, if we can't prove surgery, we can't change our state-issued identification card; there are policies preventing people from having proper placement in shelters and group homes without surgery; and some employers will not allow trans people to use the right bathroom at work until they have surgery.

As you know, the majority of trans people never have surgery, because many don't want it or need it to express their gender, and most insurance programs will not cover it. The cultural preoccupation with trans people's surgical status, and the general view that surgical status is the most important thing to know about us, is an enormous obstacle to our survival. Because there is so little accurate information about trans people circulating, it disappoints me that this film, made by people who are truly our allies, perpetuates these misrepresentations.

SF: Julie and I agree that centralizing surgery is dangerous. If we could reedit this aspect of the film, we would. However, we think the surgery sequence lends an understanding of the seriousness of the undertaking, which helps dispel the myth that it's done lightly or as part of a trend. Although we knew it might be problematic, we didn't think we could ignore it.

This doc initially came about because, while living in NYC in 2003, we found ourselves going to many benefits to raise money for chest surgery. We wanted to find out why, at that date and time, this issue was becoming more noticeable, and how the queer community was responding to it. As two gender-variant and queer people, we felt personally invested in these issues, and we began uncovering the larger questions that involved harsh judgments toward surgery within the community. We wanted to turn the mirror within the queer community and see what the dialogue was or wasn't about.

During the evolution of production we began to see the guys—Nikko, Norie, and Keegan—as a thread for the larger conversation. We aimed to have a spectrum of trans masculinity represented and worked with the three accordingly, but things changed over the three years, and by the end of production the three all had had surgery and were on hormones. Our project changed as we worked, realities

changed, community identity changed. Even in the past year, since production ceased, I've seen a huge shift in acceptance, representation, and celebration of the variance within trans masculinities in the queer communities that I'm a part of.

We're left with the question, do we stop screening it? Is there any relevance for the moments in time that were documented, even if our views and our community have evolved? If we stop screening it, what does it say to the trans youth who thank us for making a doc that they can use as a tool for education when coming out to their parents? What does that say to the people who devoted years of their lives to working with us and being very vulnerable? Is the doc doing more harm than good? Should a media maker even take these risks? These questions are always on our minds.

DS: People have told me that the film represents surgery in a sensationalist way by using "before and after" shots—a typical trope of trans documentary film—that invite the viewer to be surprised and fascinated by our bodies.

SF: I believe this editing decision was based on our lack of education at the time. Most documentaries we'd seen had the "body shots." We are both first-time filmmakers, and we saw this as a how-to formula and emulated it without realizing what exactly we were perpetuating.

On the other hand, trans folks and non-trans folks have told me that they appreciate the variety of images in terms of class, race, sexuality, and style. They've also commented that seeing the guys during their process gives viewers a wider range of images to relate to.

DS: I really appreciated how, as a result of our conversations, you reshot the portion of the film that dealt with trans youth. At first, several important community spokespeople (Jack Halberstam, Carmen Vasquez, and others) said that trans youth are being "pressured" to take hormones and that trans health care is easily accessible to trans youth. In reality, trans youth are routinely denied trans health care because of transphobia and ageism, which results in youth seeking hormones in underground economies, injecting unsafely without medical supervision, and often ending up in the juvenile justice system. While this is far more thoroughly explained now in the film, these false notions are still represented.

Many people I've spoken to feel that having this misperception articulated by multiple speakers in the film, although an alternative view is represented, is potentially damaging to the community because it fuels the all-too-common stigmatization of trans health care and the belief that trans youth cannot self-determine their genders. People feel scared about the effects of that position being circulated widely in the community, when policies that deny trans youth health care, even at LGBT health clinics, are still endangering the health and survival of trans youth. Can you talk about your thinking behind this?

SF: The aim of this documentary was to uncover some of the judgments of people within the queer community. The precise reason that some people feel it's dangerous to show this side of the position is why we thought it was important. We wanted to present Halberstam, a theorist on gender studies whose writing about trans people has been highly influential within the queer community, in order to show a pervasive argument that allies often maintain. We intended to, through the juxtaposition of differing points of view within our community, make an argument for better access to hormones for youth. We felt that presenting the views that do not support access gave our argument more strength than simply speculating on those ideologies that are currently preventing access to hormones for young people. I do believe that the power of film is that it shows, rather than tells. While some say we expose too much and it might harm the community, others say we

didn't expose enough. As a media maker, it fascinates me to hear such polar opposite reactions from people who consider themselves part of the same struggle.

People have come forward with this criticism, but I'm surprised at the lack of criticism we hear overall. Why haven't more people come forward with critical feedback? If you don't engage with the media maker and you aren't producing media, how do you expect to influence representation?

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DS: For one, this movie was made by non-trans people about trans people, like most documentaries about us are. Trans viewers who feel alienated or misrepresented may reach out to me, a trans person in the film, before they reach out to you if they feel politically distanced from you by what they saw. Also, you have already had your say. Often, when I see a film I'm unhappy with, I know that the ship has already sailed, there is no way that the filmmakers are going to change it or remove it from circulation, so why bother having yet another conversation about transphobia (especially with a non-trans person), when my life is full of those conversations, usually that I don't get to choose to opt out of? Media makers have incredible power, privilege, and responsibility. This is especially true when it comes to representing trans people because misinformation is the norm, documentary is the major tool for representing the community, and many non-trans viewers believe everything they see in a doc to be true.

SF: Yes, the one critique we've received, but don't think applies to this project, is the problem with non-trans folks making films about trans folks. We set out to create a doc that would inspire a dialogue in the queer community that wasn't happening publicly. This dialogue included us, our lives, and our community, and that was precisely our concern and drive in making it. It concerned us on many very intimate and personal levels. This is not an example of an outsider looking in and telling someone else's story. The lives of the three trans men, their thoughts, and their questions were representations of the theory we presented and the struggles we were having—this was part of our personal story. Still, if we crossed the line in *Boy I Am*, we need to see that and be accountable for that.

This brings me back to the questions we're always thinking about. What is the responsibility of the filmmaker and an audience member in getting and giving information? As a media producer and an activist, I find that there is a delicate balance between creating media that will demand attention, educate, and inspire thought and action while maintaining the boundaries of respect and supporting the evolution of the queer community. One must always be aware and strive to maintain this balance. Fear of media portrayal of the queer community was the original impetus for my involvement in media production. Yet, while the ultimate aim is to open dialogue and understanding, the media maker always risks perpetuating the representation

they deem harmful. I want to know how you, as an activist, lawyer, educator, writer, public figure/speaker (and then some), weigh these risks about representation.

DS: In terms of how I want to represent trans communities and see them represented, I do have some new ideas about that recently. I think the thing I'd like to see most is for films, trainings, shows, speeches, panels, and other public-education tools to stop trying to answer the questions, "Why are people trans? How do they feel about themselves? What are they like?" and start focusing just on, "What are the obstacles to trans people's survival and equality? What does discrimination look like? How can it be prevented?" I think that as soon as the first set of questions is in play, trans people are objects of fascination. We're suddenly defending our very existence, participating in the assumption that we are strange, unusual, interesting, and, ultimately, that our humanity has to be proven and defended. When people attend trainings, film screenings, and events that attempt to make trans people human by explaining who we are and why we are this way, we further entrench the objectifying method of viewing us that already indoctrinates people who view us on *Jerry Springer* or *Law & Order*.

What we really want to be training people to do is to stop seeing trans people as rarefied objects; to stop asking trans people inappropriate questions about our bodies, sexualities, and life histories; to stop creating policies that demand trans people disclose genital status when non-trans people are never asked to do so; and to begin to be able to identify obstacles that they are participating in or creating to trans people's equality and survival. This is a totally different framework for trans public education. It would include documentary film where trans people didn't do the usual things, like talk about their childhoods and surgeries and put on makeup or binders in front of the camera, but instead where trans people, never having to explain themselves, talked about their issues with Medicaid, prisons, schools, or shelters. The viewer would not learn the genital status of the trans subjects any more than they would learn it for the "experts" in the documentary. I think that the Sylvia Rivera Law Project's movie, *Toilet Training*, is one such documentary, and I think it is like that because it was made by trans people confronting a specific social issue.

I give this same advice to the hoards of well-meaning "researchers"—usually graduate students—who contact me wanting to conduct surveys about how trans people see our bodies or how we have sex. They are interested in studying us to deconstruct gender and to demonstrate how we think about ourselves. I beg them to stop studying us and our existence and start studying the institutional obstacles and systemic oppression we face that is so underdescribed and underdiscussed. Similarly, for people trying to sensitize their institutions to trans people, I beg them to stop creating panels where trans people speak about our life stories, and instead create meaningful training curricula that help trainees analyze the specific obstacles to trans access within the institution. It's about moving away from defining and describing trans people, and toward defining and describing the concrete changes we need to end gender oppression.

Seeing *Boy I Am* again, and dialoguing with you about it, has helped me get at this paradigm shift for trans public-education materials that I'm hoping for. I think it is the next step in building trans political power, and in moving away from a medicalized gaze on the trans body/identity, and toward a political gaze from trans experience onto oppressive institutions.