

## Redefining Remembrance: Transgender Narratives, Public Perception, and Janet Mock's

### *Redefining Realness*

On June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014, a packed ballroom in the Pennsylvania Convention Center teemed with excitement, awaiting the keynote speaker of the 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Philly Trans-Health Conference. Trans people, healthcare providers, organizers, activists, and allies gathered in this room, filling the aisles and the hallway behind the ballroom itself so much so that the organizers asked those taking up aisle space to clear a path for wheelchair accessibility. At 12:45, author, activist, and transwoman of color Janet Mock stepped up to the podium, her full head of curls bouncing with each step she took. She captivated the crowd with words of Justice for Jane Doe, self-care in community, and with every, "I LOVE YOU, JANET," that came from the audience, she took the time to respond with "I love you, too!"

At the end of her speech, a long line formed around the ballroom for a book signing and photo op session free of charge to the audience with one caveat: those in line had to have a copy of Mock's book *Redefining Realness* in their possession. A trans teenager with a short blonde bob, black Chuck Taylors, and a black dress with capped sleeves and tiny flowers printed on it stood in front of me in line. She kept turning around, making sure the organizers couldn't see that she didn't have a copy of the memoir in her hands.

"They sold out earlier before I could buy a copy," she said to me, frowning and hoping that they wouldn't kick her out of line. "I just want to meet her, she's the reason I'm here today."

A volunteer took to the microphone one last time, again asking that only those with a book stay. The skinny teen in front of me sadly stepped aside, quietly saying, "I just want to meet her..." before disappearing into the crowd.

Though I never got her name or saw her again, the words of the teenager who stood ahead of me in line at the conference still stands out six months later. “She’s the reason I’m here today,” means that Mock’s narrative impacted her life enough to give her the courage to come to the conference, to hear her role model speak, to present herself publicly. And while Mock’s narrative is a positive indicator of trans visibility in our current culture, recorded history and scholarship of LGBT liberation and rhetoric does not mirror that positivity.

There is a concerted focus on the rhetoric of sexuality, and the rhetoric of gender (in terms of women’s rhetoric), yet there exists a large gap for a rhetorical analysis of trans rhetoric. Until recently, only the overarching and oversimplified trans narrative, the “born in the wrong body” narrative, was portrayed by media and understood by its consumers. In 2011, Janet Mock came out as an openly transgender woman of color in an article for *Marie Claire*. While this article fits almost perfectly into the trans narrative, it marked the beginning of a new era in visibility for transwomen of color, aided later by Laverne Cox’s role as Sophia on *Orange is the New Black*, and Carmen Carrera’s illustrious modeling career. Mock’s 2014 New York Times Best Selling memoir *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love and So Much More* allowed for a more nuanced and complicated account of her life story, showing allies and trans people alike that her life is valuable, but does not fit into our stereotypical idea of a black transwoman. As more transpeople come out, we begin to learn more about the lived experiences of transpeople and debunk this specific narrative.

The retooling of the overarching trans narrative to be more expressive of each lived experience calls for a rhetorical analysis of these texts. Both the 2011 *Marie Claire* article “I Was Born A Boy” and Janet Mock’s 2014 memoir *Redefining Realness* creates a new rhetorical space in which trans narratives can be heard and understood as individual lived experiences by a

wider audience outside of the LGBT community. In this conference paper, I will compare the rhetorical tools, structure, and format used in both of these narratives, focusing on what differences are created in our understanding of trans lives. I will then look at how these distinctions in understanding either fit into an overarching trans narrative or work to dismantle it. Lastly, I will contextualize these ideas of a trans narrative in greater media visibility and show what has and what hasn't changed in light of these publications.

An exploration and rhetorical analyses of these narratives are important because scholarship on trans rhetoric is severely lacking. Because the study of feminist rhetoric is considered to be either the rhetoric of cisgendered women and feminist, we limit our study to only texts that fall within the gender binary of male/female. By breaking down the idea of a gender binary and reimagining gender as a spectrum, we can open the study of rhetoric up to trans narratives like Mock's, allowing their influence to be studied as heavily as the rhetoric of gay and lesbian liberation. Queer and trans rhetorician K.J. Rawson calls for a "queering" of our feminist rhetoric to include all genders and identities for a fuller rhetorical canon (49). Rhetoric, as an ever-changing field, cannot submit to a colonialist and binarist view of gender without limiting itself to a specific history and canon of rhetoric. If personal letters, journals, and newspapers of women of all colors can be accepted into rhetoric textbooks, so should the rhetoric and narratives of trans people. And as Jay Dolmage says in *Octalog III*, "the 'abnormal' or extraordinary body is highly rhetorical. So we need to look for it actively and engage the rhetorical body in our historiography" (114). I build off of both Rawson's and Dolmage's calls for expanding the rhetorical canon to include contested works and bodies in our historiography of rhetoric. By performing rhetorical analyses of Janet Mock's various narrated lived

experiences, it allows for a new field of rhetoric of the body that crosses both gendered and embodied spaces.

Before I begin, I must define the terms I will be using. I use “trans” as an all-encompassing term for transgender, transsexual, and non-binary gender identities. The National Center for Transgender Equality defines transgender as, “A term for people whose gender identity, expression or behavior is different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth” (“Transgender Terminology”). This definition is vague and is meant to be so in order to include both people that undergo gender reassignment surgery and those that do not, and even those whose identities do not fit into the gender binary. I will use “trans” henceforth to indicate any persons who do not identify with the sex assigned at birth, but this base understanding of what we know as transgender is far more complicated than this surface definition. I also use the term “cisgendered” and “cis” as a descriptor for people who do not identify as trans, and instead identify both their gender and sex with what was designated at birth. I use the term “sex worker” instead of “prostitute” as that is the term most often used by those who describe their profession as willingly choosing to provide sexual or erotic services, not those trafficked. Both “trans” and “cis” are what Janet uses in her own memoir per her author’s note. Like bell hooks says, it is imperative that we let oppressed people speak for themselves in their own words rather than speaking for them; using the words Janet uses is an effort to do that.

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When Janet Mock’s life story first appeared in the pages of the May 2011 issue of *Marie Claire*, it was not actually in her own words. The byline to her article states, “By Janet Mock as told by Kierna Mayo”. Like many magazine profiles written in first person, the author of the article is not actually the subject. Instead, as Janet notes in critiques of the article on her blog, her memoir, and in interviews, the words in “I Was Born A Boy” are not hers. Mock writes in the

introduction to her memoir, “The fact remains that the girl in that article didn’t resonate with me because it wasn’t really *my* story,” (*Redefining Realness* xiv).

This profile, though factually correct, is a sanitized version of Mock’s own life story. It flies through the details and anecdotes of her life. She writes about running around in a muumuu in the yard and being scolded by her grandmother, buying hormones off of her trans friend Wendi, going on prescribed hormones, attending college, flying to Thailand for reassignment surgery, and beginning her current relationship with her boyfriend Aaron in a short twenty-three hundred words. It paints the picture of a proud, strong woman who overcame some typical hurdles in order to fully become a woman and ends with an encouragement. It is the “if I can do it, so can you” phrase that so many articles and life stories that are meant to inspire use. In Mayo’s words, Mock says:

I hope my story resonates with other big dreamers, lets them know that no matter how huge, how insane, how unreasonable or unreachable your goal may seem, nothing—not even your own body—can hold you back if you are certain and fearless and, yes, even a little ballsy in your quest. (“I Was Born A Boy”)

By framing the article with the headline “I Was Born A Boy”, a linear plotline, and the final words of general encouragement, this 2011 narrative of Mock’s life allows the everyday *Marie Claire* reader to understand a portion of her life and find comfort in her words. It provides the common ground in which the reader can find solidarity, in the discomfort of puberty, the new college experience, and in the first date scenario, while inserting important details that are specific to Janet’s trans experience. By moving fast through her lifetime and incorporating specifically trans elements into a coming-of-age narrative, this article creates an easier to digest understanding of a trans experience. Though we should not operate under the assumption that if

something is easier to understand it will be easier to accept, perhaps that is how this early telling of Janet's story works. By giving us a condensed version of story, it allows Janet to write her life experience in her own words, in full detail, something that she would not have been able to do if this condensed narrative didn't exist. Though it is sanitized, the publication of this piece plays an important role in the availability and access to a trans narrative that otherwise would've been ignored.

Though there was so much that couldn't be said in the twenty-three hundred word *Marie Claire* article, Janet's 2014 memoir fills in gaps and allows the individual lived experience of a black transwoman to occur. Within the pages of her book, Janet frames her own story with the words of respected authors, speakers, and rhetors like Audre Lorde, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, Gloria Anzaldúa, and even Oprah Winfrey. The framework of these important novels, poetry, and quotes is a rhetorical tool allowing for the elevation of Mock's lived experience. These quotes also set the tone for the sections of her memoir and the book as a whole, giving inspiration as to why we tell our stories from Lorde, to why we must keep moving forward from Oprah. These quotes allow readers to face the realities of the difficulty in telling our own stories while also showing the freedom in doing so. Sometimes, the most difficult stories to tell and the most traumatizing moments to recall are the ones that allow a real lived experience to show through.

One such instance of this is Janet's strikingly honest retelling of her time as a sex worker in order to afford reassignment surgery. This is one of the many details, along with her history of sexual abuse, which the article did not include for both Janet's safety as well as the palpability of the original narrative. Janet writes:

Let's be clear: A world in which a young girl uses her body, her most intimate asset, in order to survive is unconscionable. But I did and still do have hope. In the small denim handbag that held my condoms, lube, baby wipes, hand sanitizer, scented lotion and lip gloss, I carried a folded piece of paper with words from Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: "I didn't come to stay." (*Redefining Realness* 208)

This moment of raw honesty about being a sex worker uses *pathos* by presenting us with both palpable imagery of common things and Angelou's short but powerful words. The items that Janet carried in her denim purse are things that we have all had experience with one way or another, but are not commonly associated with sex work. Instead, she recontextualizes how we see these items, which forces us into uncomfortable emotions and scenarios in which we must face how vital sex work was to her ability to live her truest life. Angelou's curt words that Mock kept folded with her tightly seal the *pathos* of this passage. With the knowledge that Angelou, too, was a sex worker, the statement, "I didn't come to stay," is made all the more clear. There are things we must do in order to survive, no matter how coercive, terrifying, and dangerous they might be; in this case, it is sex work that affords Janet the surgery that lets her body finally be hers.

This transgender body, as Dolmage noted, is a highly contested rhetorical space, but not one that Janet ever says she is trapped in. Instead, she finds that her body is something she can mold to become what she needs it to be, taking inspiration from pop culture and media icons. In fact, Janet named herself after pop icon Janet Jackson (*Redefining Realness* 143), and dedicated the fourteenth chapter in her memoir to Beyoncé. Her entire memoir is peppered with cultural references from Venus Xtravaganza in *Paris Is Burning* (xv), to "Free Willy, Aladdin" (77), and

Hawaiian colloquialism and dialect. These references allow us to place the narrative in a certain time frame and cultural setting, rather than just having an abstract idea of what Janet's life as a trans girl of color could have been, regardless of time and place. They also allow us to let the story of her life play out in our heads and see how full her life is outside of being trans. Yes, being trans is important to Janet's life, but it is not her whole life. These details of her home, cultural awareness, race, class, and education allow us to see the lived experience of a person who happens to be trans. The memoir format allows these large and small details to come through, filling out her life in a way that the magazine article doesn't. Janet is no longer a timeline on a page, fulfilling our expectations of how a trans person has gone about their life, but instead is Janet, a woman with a past that she must come to terms with, a woman who shows vulnerability, a woman that gives love above all else. She is not trans Janet, she is just Janet.

While both narratives about Janet Mock's life allow us to understand her in different ways, it is clear that one plays into the stereotypical trans narrative, where as the other seeks to dismantle that.

The article in *Marie Claire*, while providing us with a pivotal turning point in trans narrative visibility, plays into this overarching "born a boy" and "trapped in my body" narrative that trans people face on a regular basis. In fact, from the title of the article alone we are set up to believe this narrative. Three paragraphs later, in a transition that leads to a flashback to the "boy" trope of "born of a boy", the article reads, "I felt completely reborn. Though I had been born a boy to my native Hawaiian mother and African-American father, I would never be a man. It was the birth of my choosing this time. And now it was official: Charles had died so that Janet could live," (Mayo). Statements like this one that only appear in the article reinforce the idea that one just decides become their true self, as if it is a conscious choice we are forced to make. It does



not acknowledge the fact that Janet had lived in that body for eighteen years, not feeling trapped but only feeling less true. It plays into the ideas of the only thing involved in a trans life is the transness of that body. Janet states in a critique of the profile, “I do wish I could change one thing in the piece: the term “boy” which is used a few times. [...] My genital reconstructive surgery did *not* make me a girl. I was *always* a girl,” (“More Than A Pretty Face”). Janet acknowledges that even though her story was told to the best of Kierna Mayo’s ability, it still plays into the narrative that is set out of trans people. She was always Janet in her body, never trapped, never a boy.

Luckily, the publication of her memoir and its subsequent success manages to dismantle this idea of an overarching trans narrative. It does this by not trying to smooth over issues that are hard to handle, such as sexual abuse, sex work, and the buying and selling of hormones to children. Instead, the memoir portrays life the way it really is because it includes these tough issues. As Thomas Page McBee wrote in an article for Salon, “I don’t think I was born in the wrong body. I am not ‘finally myself.’ I’ve never spent a day being anyone else. Mine is another story, a real and complex story, and one, by definition, that’s not as easy to tell.” By Janet writing in her own words and telling of such complex issues, her memoir allows us to live alongside her, to understand the joy, the pain, and the complication that she lived. She allows us to empathize with her and does not assume we need a lazy narrative in order to accept her story. Janet affords allies the space to be educated by her, and trans people a space to tell their own complicated and messy stories that each life, trans or not, contains.

While it is clear that Janet Mock’s narratives, in both the article and *Redefining Realness* created major spaces in which trans lives are visible to and understood by other trans people and allies, greater media visibility still needs to make space for these narratives. Take, for example,

Piers Morgan's framing of Janet's life story in a February 2014 interview shortly after the release of her memoir. The entirety of her interview broadcasts "Was a boy until 18" listed under her name (CNN), rather than listing her as "author and activist" as other shows have, such as Melissa Harris-Perry. Upon Janet's critique of this rhetorical framework in her interview, Morgan fights with and speaks over Janet repeatedly in order to convince his audience that he is a loyal supporter of hers. Morgan shows that despite the work Janet's memoir does to create a space in which new trans narratives can occur, these narratives are only visible to those who choose to accept this newfound responsibility of recognizing lived experiences. It is easy for Piers Morgan to ignore Janet's insistence that she was not born a boy, rather she was born a baby, because at the end of the day, Morgan's cisgendered privilege allows him to continue ignoring the lived experiences that are not his own.

The same is true for those allies who have no connection to the trans community. As much as we want to give our friends and families these new narratives, often times, unless we have skin in the game or friends and family affected by these issues, it is easy to ignore the plight and lived experiences of those who have been continually erased and ignored. And if the events in Ferguson, Missouri have taught us anything, it is also easier to fall back upon old tropes and stereotypes instead of truly thinking about what systematic oppressions we benefit from and dismantling those ideas. These oppressions are what keep Jane Doe, a sixteen-year-old Latina trans girl imprisoned in a boys holding facility in Connecticut, though no charges have been brought against her. These oppressions are what lead to Monica Jones, a black transwoman, being wrongly arrested for manifestation of intent to prostitute in Arizona because she is trans, then subsequently detained at Australian immigration as a "threat" ahead of World AIDS Day, then deported back to America just yesterday. These oppressions are what lead to CeCe

McDonald being sentenced to 41 months in a men's prison for 2<sup>nd</sup> degree manslaughter, despite the fact that she was clearly just defending herself from racist and transphobic violent attacks. These oppressions killed Islan Nettles when she was beat to death in the streets of Harlem because she was black and trans. These oppressions cause half of all anti-LGBTQ murders are against transwomen, 73% of whom are people of color (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs). If we continue to rely on stereotypes and oppressive structures because they benefit us, then will it matter how much space trans stories are given in rhetorical historiographies and scholarship? We must make it matter. Allowing Janet Mock's narrative this space to be studied allows us to value both voices and lives.

In conclusion, Janet Mock's 2011 profile in *Marie Claire* magazine and her 2014 New York Times Best Selling *Redefining Realness* create a larger and more accessible space for a new trans narrative, one that does not need to be applied to each trans life. While the article version of Janet's life is simplified, sanitized, and stereotypical, it created a new rhetorical platform where written narratives of trans lives can exist. The popularity of the article allowed for a nuanced account of Janet's life in memoir form to be published, giving us the narrative that we needed in order to see the individuality of each being. Trans people have their own experiences and live their own lives; Janet's memoir shows that there is now a time and a space for these narratives to be visible. We may reject making concessions in order to fit into a stereotypical narrative now, but it must be said that there is value to these first abridged narratives. Without the visibility of these first stories, wider acceptance for new histories of detailed, messy, stressful, and beautiful lives would not exist. In accepting the stereotype first, it allows transpeople the space to safely tell their stories, then go back and revise later. If Janet's narratives have taught us anything, popular acceptance can lead to smarter retellings and valued

life. If there is space in the rhetorical canon for these narratives of negotiated, non-binarist, and fluid bodies to exist, then we must work to include them in our study of rhetoric. And in order for our scholarship to continue expanding, we must accept new texts and words from new rhetors. The only way to get these new texts is to celebrate the voices of the trans people who write them, to value their lives, and to let them live.

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