Annie Rombach

10 December 2021

Jazz Jennings, the Transgender Narrative, and the Rights of Transgender Children

Introduction

The social movement I've chosen to analyze is the movement for transgender rights, specifically for transgender youth. Advocacy for trans rights has existed for as long as trans people have existed, which is to say since people have existed. However, evidence and records of these trans people and their acts of resistance can be hard to find because they are erased from history. Colonial policing of gender and sexual variance eradicated anyone who deviated from strict norms from historical records, therefore when studying this topic researchers are limited in what information is available.

For my purposes, I would define the first important event surrounding the movement as the pioneering of medical transition with the use of hormones and surgery by physician Harry Benjamin in 1949 (Head). His later book *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (1966) became integral to the field (Stone 228). However, the contributions to the field could have very harmful outcomes for trans patients and they could end up being abused by medical professionals. This was due to the way patients were diagnosed. To get the surgery they desired, and then have a hope of fitting into societal expectations, trans people had to fit into a certain narrative like the ones given by doctors like Harry Benjamin (Stone 228). On top of that, white and middle- or upper-class trans people were much more likely to get access to treatment than lower-class trans people or trans people of color.

In their everyday lives, trans people, and disproportionately trans people of color, were subjected to violence by police daily, and arrested police on charges of cross-dressing, or "impersonating a woman". Resistance to this oppression had been ongoing but a famous breaking point was the Stonewall Riot in 1969. Two famous participants in the riot were advocates Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera (Head). Both trans women, they became notable advocates for gay and trans rights, even facing discrimination from within the queer community for being trans women of color.

Flashing forward to the modern era, the rhetorical object I've chosen to focus on is Jazz Jennings. Jennings is a 20-year-old trans woman who had her journey as a transgender child documented and shared with the public through interviews on national television interviews, a documentary, *I am Jazz: A Family in Transition* (which shows her at age 11), as well as her own reality television series, *I am Jazz*, which started airing in 2015 when she was 14 and is still airing currently (Mock; Muldowney et. al). I think Jennings' experiences will serve as a good lens through which to view the issues that trans children face today, like allowing trans children to go on puberty blockers, allowing trans children to play sports, and just simply letting trans kids play and interact with other children like normal kids (Mock; Carras). I seek to determine the effects of the popularization of Jennings' story as a trans woman, as she brings public attention to issues important to the trans community, but also how the spreading of her narrative may be restrictive to trans children whose experience with their gender may not look like hers.

This issue is close to my heart because I identify as trans and non-binary. I did not know I was non-binary when I was a child, because there are not many non-binary narratives made available to children. However, I think it's very important that trans kids have resources and are not met with discrimination. Beyond that, it's also important to consider the diversity of the trans

identity. To properly aid trans children, it has to be understood that their stories and needs will vary. I'm hoping to learn more specifics about the obstacles that trans kids are facing today so that I can better understand the issues and how they can be effectively addressed.

Context

Jazz Jennings was born on October 6, 2000, in Florida to parents Jeanette and Greg and siblings Ari, Sander, and Griffen (Jennings 2). Only a few years later as a toddler, she began to express her identity as a girl in various ways such as wanting to dress like her older sister, wanting to be referred to as a girl, or expressing her desire to have a vagina instead of a penis (Jennings 3-5). After realizing she was transgender, her parents allowed her to transition socially as they allowed her to dress in feminine clothes and used she/her pronouns to refer to her (Jennings 21). Her fifth birthday party served as her "coming out" where she got to wear feminine clothing in front of her friends (Jennings 29).

Later, when her parents were fighting to enroll her in kindergarten as a girl, they weren't getting a response from the school administration, so they enlisted the help of a local paper to create a sense of urgency for Jennings' cause (Jennings 34). Though this news story did not give the family's real names, it put Jennings on the map for later publicity, as the story was picked up by larger outlets like CNN and *Miami Herald* (Jennings 41). This led to Jennings' first national television appearance on *20/20* with Barbara Walters when she was only six years old (Jennings 43). This interview is when she and her family first started using the last name "Jennings" in place of their real last name, and when Jazz started going by the name "Jazz" (Jennings 44). Jennings and her parents talked to Walters about her gender identity and what it meant to be transgender. Jennings recalls her parents receiving many letters from grateful parents of transgender children who felt less alone after watching the segment (46). Jennings and her

parents continued to pursue opportunities for her to appear publicly and spread awareness and education about transgender children.

Today, Jennings is the most recognizable trans person her age to have had her journey so closely documented. She let the public see her transition socially as a child and gave insight into her medical transition through her reality show *I Am Jazz* (2015-), various interviews and public appearances after her segment on *20/20*, as well as her memoir, *Being Jazz: My Life as a (Transgender) Teen* (2016). Her rise in popularity has come at a time of more recognition of trans issues, as an article about her gender confirmation surgery says, "Known for her relentless advocacy -- from gender neutral bathrooms, to playing school sports -- she's tackled some of the most divisive issues for trans kids head on." (Muldowney et al.) I will examine how her unique position as a young trans person in the public eye has contributed to public understanding of trans youth and the discourse around trans issues.

To understand Jazz's position in the transgender rights movement, we have to understand the current state of that movement. In 2021, there have been a record number of bills intended to restrict trans rights introduced in state legislatures across the country (PBS). For example, there was an executive order in South Dakota banning trans girls from girls' sports teams as well as a measure by Arkansas legislature to prevent physicians from giving trans kids gender-affirming medical care (PBS). Similar legislature is being considered and passed every day as PBS states, "According to the Human Rights Campaign, an LGBTQ advocacy group, lawmakers in 28 states are considering 93 bills targeting the rights of transgender Americans. And sports bans in Arkansas and Mississippi are set to become law this summer." Although it seems sometimes that popular opinion is shifting in favor of LGBTQ+ liberation, as evidenced by this pattern of legislation, there are still systemic barriers against trans people.

After gay marriage was legalized in 2015, LBGTQ+ advocates wanted to focus on equality and rights for the trans community (PBS). However, as the advocates shifted focus, so did their opponents. Those opposed to LBGTQ+ rights started forming defenses against the potential liberation of the trans community. Most prominently this included bathroom bills, which did not allow trans people to use the bathroom that matches their gender identity, rather forcing them to use the bathroom that aligns with their gender assigned at birth. This was framed as a way to protect other bathroom users because a false and problematic narrative was formulated that trans people are sexually deviant pedophiles who want to spy on other people or children in the restroom. This view traces back to 1954, when in "Transsexualism and Transvestism as Psycho-Somatic and Somato-Psychic Syndromes," Dr. Harry Benjamin characterizes the practice of cross-dressing and other traits of transness as an expression of sexual fetish. This created a false narrative that trans people are dangerous when in reality, these laws made trans people more vulnerable to harassment and assault.

This sexualization and objectification of trans people are at the root of many of the issues of discrimination. Whether it's keeping trans people out of bathrooms, or preventing them from playing on sports teams, there's fear due to a lack of understanding of transness because many people do not know a trans person personally (PBS). This lack of knowledge only fuels the mistaken idea that trans people are dangerous sexual perverts. This misconception causes a lot of alarm with trans youth wanting to transition – whether just socially through clothes, pronouns, or a new name, or medically with puberty blockers or hormones. Some of the laws against trans rights banned trans medical treatment like allowing trans children to go on puberty blockers, which pause the process of puberty in a child's body (PBS). Puberty blockers allow trans children time to decide if they want to transition or not. Without access to them, trans children

are forced to go through the puberty of the gender they were assigned at birth, which can cause extreme dysphoria and distress (Jennings 91).

The opponents of trans rights think topics of transness or being "trans" are highly inappropriate for children because they often confuse sexuality with gender and subsequently sexualize trans people simply for existing. It's easy to find fear-mongering on social media which spreads the narrative that the crazy liberal left will be letting children surgically alter their genitals at the drop of a hat, when in reality, gender-affirming surgery is not available to trans people until adulthood, and being able to get approved for that is not as easy as people seem to believe. According to *Radically Listening to Transgender Children: Creating Epistemic Justice through Critical Reflection and Resistant Reflections*, because of the medicalization and pathologization of transness, it's required that trans patients be diagnosed with gender dysphoria before they can get any gender-affirming treatment (Steele and Nicholson 111). Steele and Nicholson write, "Since one of the driving factors for gender dysphoria remaining in the DSM at all is for transgender youth and adults to be able to access medical interventions using health insurance, the criteria is written to establish a threshold far above the level at which early childhood teachers should be operating in their commitment to supporting children's needs" (Steele and Nicholson 111). The clinical definition of dysphoria often uses terms like "distress" and "conflict" to signal to medical professionals what necessitates an intervention, and trans children may not always fit into these standards. Intervention for trans youth will most likely not be medical, or permanent changes but trying new pronouns, clothes, or names.

In examining trans people's fight for their rights, and notably, Jennings' visible battle for liberation in her life as a trans woman, I find body rhetoric a useful lens. I'll be using Kevin Michael DeLuca's explanation of body rhetoric in "Unruly Arguments: The Body Rhetoric of

Earth First!, Act Up, and Queer Nation" to examine how Jennings and other advocates put their bodies and personal safety on the line to defend the right to safety of all trans people.

Additionally, I'll be applying Catherine R. Squires' ideas from "Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres" to the trans community as a public with diverse circumstances, opinions, and needs.

Rhetorical Perspective

In his work, "Unruly Arguments: The Body Rhetoric of Earth First!, Act Up, and Queer Nation", DeLuca uses the work of activist organizations to explain the tactic of using bodies to make a political argument. As he states, "they slight formal modes of public argument while performing unorthodox political tactics that highlight bodies as resources for argumentation and advocacy" (DeLuca 9). These organizations rely on the images of bodies outside the margins of "normal" society to disrupt order and draw attention to their cause, therefore creating a body rhetoric (DeLuca 10). Because they did not have the resources to buy airtime as a corporation conventionally would, Earth First!, Queer Nation, and ACT UP got that airtime by creating images with bodies that caught the media's eye (DeLuca 10). As a consequence of that, "Their bodies, then, become not merely flags to attract attention for the argument but the site and substance of the argument itself" (DeLuca 10).

For Earth First!, this meant activists sitting in trees, using their bodies to block roads, chaining themselves to logging equipment, and attending public hearings dressed in animal costumes (DeLuca 12). All of these acts drew attention to their causes for concern including the clearcutting of old-growth forests, loss of biodiversity, and overall damage to nature because of the striking images they created of humans being vulnerable and risking their lives for the sake of the natural world (DeLuca 12).

Meanwhile, in the organizations ACT UP and Queer Nation, “the activists use their bodies to rewrite the homosexual body as already constructed by dominant mainstream discourses – diseased, contagious, deviant, invisible” (DeLuca 17). The presence of queer bodies was a protest itself by making this group of people visible and refusing to be pushed into the fray and out of the view of society. Activists staged same-sex “kiss-ins”, where same-sex couples would kiss in a public space (DeLuca 19). Participants were publicly demonstrating their homosexuality, and putting themselves at risk to do it, in order to get society to care about issues like the AIDS crisis. These protests pushed for changes to healthcare policy and the direction of resources to the AIDS crisis to be able to approve drugs and give them an affordable price (DeLuca 17). ACT UP also staged a “die-in” as a response to the Catholic Church’s condemnation of homosexuality and their advocacy against safe sex and AIDS education in schools (DeLuca 18). In these protests, the activists would interrupt Mass at the Catholic Church and lay on the ground to show themselves as “symbolic victims and potential actual victims of Church policies” to force the Church to realize that their rhetoric was killing queer people (DeLuca 19).

In her work, “Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres”, Squires critiques Habermas’ idea of a single public sphere and examines the idea of multiple publics grouped around identities like race, gender, or sexuality proposed by Calhoun and Robbins (Squires 446). She questions what makes a public a counterpublic, and how we can acknowledge the heterogeneity in a counterpublic with a shared identity (Squires 447). She posits that there are multiple publics, and further suggests seeing the Black public as multiple publics existing simultaneously, and a public that can experience fragmentation due to ideological clashes (Squires 452). Squires references ideas by authors Asen

and Young that counterpublics emerge as a response to unjust treatment in a wider public, and that is what unites members, so it should not be assumed that they share any other characteristics (Squires 453). Overall, Squires advocates against seeing any marginalized community as a monolith and proposes her own types of marginalized counterpublics in order to remedy this issue: enclave, counterpublic, and satellite (Squires 448).

Rhetorical Analysis

In her public presence as a trans child and now trans woman, Jazz Jennings' body has become part of her activism. This is because of how her experiences and advocacy have revolved around issues that affect her and other trans people, in other words, impact their human bodies. Her body is constant in her activism whether it's discussing the importance of access to gender-affirming treatment for her body or her right for her body to be allowed in spaces like a girls' soccer team or a girls' bathroom. Jennings' image became public and by proxy, her body has become a symbol of fighting for the rights of young trans people, as she makes herself visible in order to make trans people visible, much like the activists of ACT UP and Queer Nation which DeLuca discusses (DeLuca 17).

In her memoir, Jennings shares experiences that make it evident that her body has been put through pain and discomfort, and has been subjected to discrimination because of her status as an openly trans girl. This discrimination started early in her life as her preschool tried to mandate that she wear only pants and no skirts because of their dress code. Her parents argued for her to be able to wear a skirt, but they had to compromise on skorts, a skirt with shorts underneath, because of her "boy body" (Jennings 34). Skorts were meant to be accommodating to Jennings' "boy body" but they turned out to not be designed for her body at all because she

spent the day adjusting herself constantly with her teacher giving her reminders to “stop bothering yourself” (Jennings 37).

Jennings also recounts the issue of using the bathroom while she was attending elementary school. Her only options were to use an in-classroom bathroom which allowed no privacy or to go to the nurse’s office whenever she needed to use the restroom (Jennings 71). These options were not viable for Jennings, so she would try to avoid the bathroom altogether, and often ended up wetting herself, meaning she’d come home with wet clothes, or her mother would have to bring her fresh clothes in the middle of the school day (Jennings 71). Once after using the girls’ bathroom when she was sure it was empty, she was admonished by a librarian who told her that she wasn’t allowed in that bathroom and that the principal would have to be informed (Jennings 72). Though no one followed up with Jennings, so presumably the librarian never actually reported her, this incident led her to go back to enduring the discomfort of peeing her pants again. It wasn’t until the school got a new principal years later who was willing to support Jennings’ rights that she was able to use the girls’ bathroom at school (Jennings 113).

Her body later became a barrier to her participation in girls’ soccer. Her registration was denied because she’s trans, but her coach allowed her to play as an unregistered guest player (Jennings 52). However, when the state soccer association was informed of her unregistered status, she was removed from the team (Jennings 53). The state soccer association rejected her registration again when she applied with a passport listing her as female and letters from doctors affirming her gender (Jennings 59).

These were times when Jennings existing in her body was an act of resistance. As in DeLuca’s body rhetoric, her body was being discriminated against, so she flipped the script and made it a site of advocacy. With each obstacle, she used her body and presence, backed by her

parents, to push back against the norm. Her parents kept pushing for her right to use the girls' bathroom, as her mother reminded the administration every time she came to school with new clothes for Jennings when she'd wet herself that their discriminatory actions were the reason for Jennings' suffering (Jennings 71). They were at an impasse with several principals over the years, until the school got a new principal who was cooperative. For the issue of getting on the soccer team, Jennings' father persisted for years to try to get her the right to be on the team, eventually appealing her case to the United States Soccer Federation (USSF). The USSF did issue Jennings a female player card so she could play again and "took things even further by bringing in a member of NCLR to create a task force to write a transgender-inclusive policy to be followed by all states, so that no other transgender athlete, regardless of age, would ever have to go through what I had" (Jennings 59-60).

Jennings served as a kind of placeholder for all trans children, using her anger at her own situation to propel her to advocate for things that would affect many lives as she shares about the soccer policy, "I couldn't believe that by fighting so hard for me, my parents ended up helping to make a change that affected the nation" and describes how this motivated to use her voice in the future as she gained autonomy to be able to make a difference (Jennings 60). In 2018, she explained,

> "From the time I was six years old, I've been sharing my story. And you know at first I thought, 'Okay, this is all going to come to an end one day and then I'll be able to live my life.' But more and more I realized that I was given this platform for a reason and that I have a strong and powerful voice" (Muldowney et al.)

With that strong and powerful voice, Jennings has created a lot of positive change for the trans community by creating awareness of her experience as a trans child and advocating for

issues like the trans people's right to use the bathroom of their gender identity and right to participate in a sports team of their gender identity. However, because she is one of so few young transgender figures and her voice is so powerful, the dominance of her narratives means that other narratives may get overlooked.

Large parts of Jennings' story align with the popularized trans narrative discussed by Jacob Tobia in their memoir *Sissy: A Coming-of-Gender Story*. Tobia writes a Mad Lib titled "My Classical, Binary Transgender Story", meant to critique the popularized trans narrative that the media and medical community subscribes to (Tobia 12). Like in the Mad Lib, Jennings expresses feelings of being in the "wrong body", knowing from a young age that she was the other binary gender than the one she was assigned at birth, and she takes hormones and receives gender confirmation surgery to complete her physical transition to the other binary gender than the one she was assigned at birth. Of course, there isn't anything wrong with her story matching up with the popular narrative, as Tobia explains, "There's isn't anything inherently wrong with this narrative. […] But it is not okay for cisgender people to take that story as *the* trans story, because that narrative simply isn't true for all of us" (Tobia 14).

An unintentional consequence of the publicity of Jennings' story is the fact that many people will think that her experience represents all trans experiences, because there are not many narratives that have been captured like hers and been viewed by such a wide audience, so they don't have other things to refer to. In his essay, "Becoming a Transgender Failure: Speciation, Benevolent Transphobia, and the Persistence of Binary Gender", Ethan Czuy Levine argues, ""the transgender person", is undergoing speciation. By "transgender speciation," I refer to social processes whereby "the transgender person" becomes a recognizable social type, a status that may be enacted successfully or unsuccessfully by various actors in social encounters" (43).

He lays out a similar narrative to Tobia's Mab Lib in which the archetypal trans person wants to "cross over" permanently from one normative gender category to the other and seeks hormone treatments and gender-affirming surgeries as their way of achieving normative femininity or masculinity (Levine 43). This is the type of story that media likes to depict, because it has a clear start and end in binary genders which fit into heteropatriarchal norms. This is why Jennings has gotten widespread attention.

In other words, by applying Squires' theory to the trans identity, it is important to understand that although trans people share the marginalized identity of being transgender, the group is not homogenous by any means. The counterpublic of transgender people encompasses diverse identities, stories, and goals for their journey with their gender. A study from 2006 by Arnold H. Grossman and Anthony R. D'augelli highlights the differences in trans youth's experiences, as they reveal, "The youth indicated that they were, on the average, 10.4 years old (range 6 to 15) when they first became aware that their gender identity or gender expression did not correspond to their biological sex (even though they might not have labeled their feelings)" (120-121). While Jennings knew very early in her childhood, many participants in this study did not discover their identity until later. Jennings has a very supportive family, but Grossman and D'augelli point out that trans youth live with varying levels of acceptance by their family and community, as 66% of the youth said they were out to their parents, with a higher level of disclosure to friends and parents (120). Additionally, only 50% of the youth lived at home with their parents while 29% lived in a group home and the remaining participants had "other" living arrangements (Grossman and D'augelli 119).

Jennings herself does demonstrate an understanding of these nuances, explaining in her book that many people don't have the financial means or support of their family that helped her

undergo her physical transition including puberty blockers, hormone treatments, and gender-affirming surgery. She states, “I really want to stress that every single person’s transition is different. Some people choose surgery and hormones, and some don’t. It’s a deeply personal process” (Jennings 91). In 2018, when asked about plans after college, she expressed interest in sociology and gender studies, commenting, “I am finding myself becoming more and more passionate about the gender binary of this world and just the difference between gender and sex and helping people understand that so that all, you know, gender nonconforming individuals can be more accepted in this world” (Muldowney et al.).

Jennings as an individual clearly understands the diversity of the trans community, but it seems that her insight on the finer details is overshadowed by the way that the media tends to sensationalize her narrative. The title of the 2018 article in which she discussed the gender binary is “Transgender teen and 'I Am Jazz' star Jazz Jennings on sharing the final steps of her transition journey: her gender confirmation surgery” which plays neatly into the medicalized binary trans narrative, and objectifies her – focusing on genitals as something for clicks so that the reader may not pay as much attention to her full life as a trans person and her insight on the trans counterpublic.

Conclusion

Throughout her life, Jazz Jennings has used her struggles as a trans person to make change for the trans community as a whole. She has spoken out on the rights of trans people to access bathrooms that match their gender identity, access gender-affirming care, and be able to play on sports teams, as well as many others important to the community (Muldowney et al.). Her body and her image have become an emblem for the rights of trans youth. However, in the dissemination of her story by the media, many of the nuances of the trans community as a

counterpublic are lost in favor of a classical, binary trans story that the audience will easily understand and happily consume without thinking critically about the fact that Jennings does not represent all trans people. After examining this issue, it seems that the way to remedy this issue is simply to have more trans representation, and share more trans stories from trans people so that one narrative does not have to speak for everyone.

Bibliography

Benjamin, Harry. “Transsexualism and Transvestism as Psycho-Somatic and Somato-Psychic Syndromes.” The Transgender Studies Reader, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, Routledge, London, 2006, pp. 45–52.

Carras, Christi. “Reality Star Jazz Jennings Was Barred from Girls Soccer as a Transgender Child.” Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles Times, 30 Mar. 2021, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/tv/story/2021-03-30/jazz-jennings-trans-sports-ban-i-am-jazz.

DeLuca, Kevin Michael. “Unruly Arguments: The Body Rhetoric of Earth First!, Act Up, and Queer Nation.” *Argumentation and Advocacy*, vol. 36, no. 1, 1999, pp. 9–21., https://doi.org/10.1080/00028533.1999.11951634.

Grossman, Arnold H., and Anthony R. D'augelli. “Transgender Youth.” *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 51, no. 1, 17 Oct. 2008, pp. 111–128., https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v51n01_06.

Head, Tom. “A Timeline and History of Transgender Rights in the United States.” ThoughtCo, ThoughtCo, 24 Nov. 2020, https://www.thoughtco.com/transgender-rights-in-the-united-states-721319.

Jennings, Jazz. *Being Jazz: My Life as a (Transgender) Teen*. Crown Books for Young Readers, 2016.

Levine, Ethan Czuy. “Becoming a Transgender Failure: Speciation, Benevolent Transphobia, and the Persistence of Binary Gender.” *Women & Language*, vol. 41, no. 1, Fall 2018, pp. 39–61. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=132687649&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Mock, Janet. “'I Am Jazz': My Conversation with the Trans Tween & Her Mother.” Janet Mock, https://janetmock.com/2011/11/25/i-am-jazz-transgender-jeanette-documentary/.

Muldowney, Katie, et al. “Transgender Teen and 'I Am Jazz' Star Jazz Jennings on Sharing the Final Steps of Her Transition Journey: Her Gender Confirmation Surgery.” ABC News, ABC News Network, 15 Oct. 2018, https://abcnews.go.com/Health/transgender-teen-jazz-star-jazz-jennings-sharing-final/story?id=58513271.

“Record Number of Bills Look to Restrict Trans Rights in the U.S.” PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, 30 Mar. 2021, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/record-number-of-bills-look-to-restrict-lgbtq-rights-in-the-u-s.

Squires, Catherine R. “Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres.” *Communication Theory*, vol. 12, no. 4, Nov. 2002, pp. 446–468., https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2002.tb00278.x.

Steele, Katie, and Julie Nicholson. *Radically Listening to Transgender Children: Creating Epistemic Justice through Critical Reflection and Resistant Reflections*. Lexington Books, 2020.

Stone, Sandy, and Stephen Whittle. “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto.” The Transgender Studies Reader, edited by Susan Stryker, Routledge, London, 2006, pp. 227–228.

Tobia, Jacob. “A Quick Manifesto.” Sissy: A Coming-of-Gender Story, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 2019, pp. 11–19.