

Tranny: An Evidence-Based Review

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Abstract

Discourse surrounding the term tranny has become more than a little heated. In fact, a RuPaul Drag Race runner-up enacted the mock execution of a trans woman named Parker Molloy for the apparent crime of asking that folks not be so casual with the language people use while killing trans people. Andrea James thought the mock execution [...]

Article

Discourse surrounding the term tranny has become more than a little heated. In fact, a RuPaul Drag Race runner-up enacted the mock execution of a trans woman named Parker Molloy for the apparent crime of asking that folks not be so casual with the language people use while killing trans people. Andrea James thought the mock execution was “hilarious” and a HuffPo Gay editor promoted the video.

There’s a number of posts out there critiquing the mock execution of Parker Molloy. This article will not substantively focus on these current issues. Instead, it will focus on the evidence-based history of the term because I’ve noticed a common historical narrative used when defending the use of the term. According to the narrative, tranny as a trans term goes way back. In fact, they assert, the term didn’t have a negative connotation when used way back when.

Writing for the Advocate, Calpernia Addams wrote:

But tranny has evolved, from scattered in-community usage by drag and trans entertainers to accreting negative connotations from its frequent use as a dismissive semi-insult -- it’s gone from “Those trannies kicked ass last night when they got raided at Stonewall” to “Ugh, look at that hot tranny mess!”

Addams recounts the latter meaning in her 2008 video, *Bad Questions to Ask a Transsexual: Old Version*. The video, which has almost half a million views, juxtaposes the term tranny with fag. This purposeful invocation of the slur fag is contextually important as it represents the only place in the video wherein fag is used.

Bad Question #10: ‘Girl, are you a tranny?’

[derisive laugh]

I usually get this one in gay bars and it’s usually coming from fags who already know that I’m transsexual. They’re just trying to let me know that I’m not getting away with anything. It’s kind of like saying, ‘Wow, you look really slim. Are you wearing a girdle?’

Backhanded compliment much? I'll backhand ya!

Addams makes it clear that the current contextual meaning of tranny is not something she appreciates being applied to her experience. While it seems that Addams' estimation of tranny is empirically shared among many trans women (as evidenced by strong social media backlash), the historical narrative Addams offers is not so easily supported by evidence.

Recently, the TransAdvocate featured a peer-reviewed paper looking at the historical rhetoric surrounding the term transgender. While doing research for this paper, I also looked into the historical context of tranny. The reality is that I did not find uses of the term earlier than 1983. Some have asserted that the term was in use before the term appeared in print and I would agree that this is likely the case. However, I can find no evidence to support the belief that the term was in wide use years or even decades before it appeared in print. This suggests that the term only gained cultural currency in the early 1980s.

What follows is a review of the term as it has been applied within media. The purpose of this article isn't to stoke the ire of any particular lexical faction. Instead, I invite you to review the evidence and thoughtfully consider the two debatable questions at the end of this article.

The Oxford Dictionary of English Slang (p. 336) has the following entry:

Trannie: Noun. A transvestite. 1983 -. GAY TIMES “By 11 pm they seem drunkenly immune to the influx of trannies, trendies, and other creatures of the night” (1990). [From abbreviation of transvestite + -ie.]

Word Usage: Historical Context

1985



Figure 1. 1985, *New Yorker*, page 49

“In March, Sally joined a cabaret act called the Tranny Crew. The group consisted of three women and one transvestite. All four stuffed their bras and performed original rap music at the Pyramid Club.”

1986

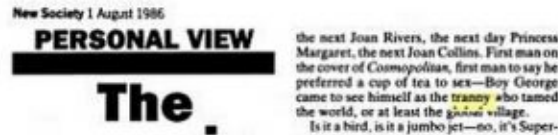


Figure 2. 1986, *New Society* (p. 23)

“First man on the cover of *Cosmopolitan*, first man to say he preferred a cup of tea to sex - Boy George came to see himself a the tranny who tamed the world, or at least the global village.”

1991

‘Queer means to fuck with gender. There are straight queers, bi-queers, tranny queers, lez queers, fag queers, SM queers, fisting queers in every single street in this apathetic country of ours.’ Anonymous leaflet: ‘Queer Power Now’, London, 1991, quoted in Smyth, *Cherry Lesbians Talk Queer Notions*, Scarlet Press, London, 1992, p. 17.

Figure 3. 1991 *Queer Community Flier*

“Queer means to fuck with gender. There are straight queers, bi-queers, tranny queers, lez queers, fag queers, SM queers, fisting queers in every single street in this apathetic country of ours.”

1993

impersonation that belies complete disguise: the hairy leg in the lace suspender, the bald pate in the bonnet. In ‘tranny’ (transvestite) publications such as *The World of Transvestism*, a man’s hirsute calf protrudes beneath the silken skirt, the shadow of an erection is pressed against the lacy lingerie. One TV writes:

Figure 4. 1993, *Dirty looks: Women, Pornography, Power*, p. 215

“Cross-dressers often desire, not the security of a perfect imitation, but rather the delicious impersonation that belies complete disguise: the hairy leg in the lace suspender, the bald pate in the bonnet. In ‘tranny’ (transvestite) publications such as *The World of Transvestite*, a man’s hairsuit calf protrudes beneath the silken skirt, the shadow of an erection is pressed against the lacy lingerie.”

1994

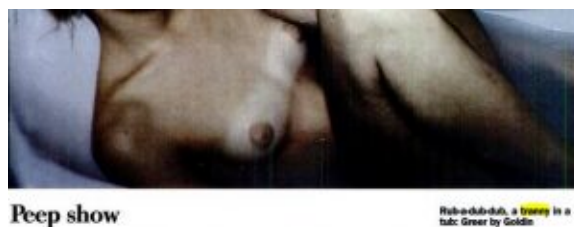


Figure 5. 1994, *The Advocate Magazine* p 115

“Rub-a-dub-dub, a tranny in a tub”

Karen nodded. "He worked the tranny strip on Davie off Burrard. How's your hand?" She eyed the splints on his fingers.
 "I'm ambidextrous," Nick said, and threw her a smile.
 "Gimme crack and I'll rim you," Karen whispered.

Figure 6. 1994, *Ripper* by Michael Slade, p159

"Karen nodded. "He worked the tranny strip on Davie off Burrard. How's your hand?" She eyed the splints on his fingers. "I'm ambidextrous," Nick said, and threw her a smile. "Gimme crack and I'll rim you," Karen whispered.

1998

The domain tranny.com is created

2000



Figure 7. October 2000, *Winnipeg Free Press*

"In Tranny School, a former porn model conducts training classes in how to be a transvestite."

2002



Figure 8. August 2002, *Santa Fe Reporter*

"Not since The Rocky Horror Picture Show has a rag-tag troupe of trannie glamsters rocked so hard, and with such heart. Originally conceived and written by John Cameron Mitchell (who spent some of his formative years in Albuquerque), Hedwig and the Angry Inch is a musical about an aging German punk/glam chanteuse, Hedwig (ne Hansel), whose life is dictated by a sex change operation gone way, way wrong--the mishap leaves Hedwig stuck somewhere between male and female."

2003

Otherwise, transgender characters “are primarily brought in during sweeps,” laments Adams, “where they’re either the ‘tragic

tranny’ — homeless, murder victim, killer — or, when there’s a sort of liberal paternalism: Oh, these poor sick people, we really need to help them.” He notes that a recent episode of CBS’ top-rated *CSI* centered on “an elusive criminal mastermind, a serial killer, where it’s revealed that he had a sex-change operation from female to male, with creepy flashbacks and horror music behind it.”

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Figure 9. 2003 TV listing for NYPD Blue's "Tranny Get Your Gun"

Clip from NYPD Blue's "Tranny Get Your Gun"



Figure 10. June 2003, Santa Fe Reporter

"Mothers, lock the doors and hide your children (unless you happen to be a member of PFLAG), because Pride Week is upon us. The Paramount has long been the traditional cornerstone of Pride activities,

but this year Swig joins in on the fun, and the queer-friendly gaggle of ladies ‘n’ trannie gents at Backroad Pizza will throw a new twist into this favorite institution.”



Figure 11. October 2003, Santa Fe Reporter

“Moment-in-time #2 also involved Andy Primm and Chopper Sick Balls’ lead singer Sue Fury. It was last Sunday night, when CSB opened for the Hollis Wake at Bar B. The Hollis Wake busted into their groovy little number “Gingivitis,” prompting Primm and Fury to commence what can only be described as strange punk rock lambada. It was hot and sexually ambiguous-- here’s a borderline trannie singer with melting Iggy Pop eyeliner dirty dancing with Santa Fe’s answer to David Bowie--and it made me feel sexy and careless and happy I was there.

tranny

1642 up, 657 down 👍👎

1. transvestite
2. transsexual
3. transparency (photog.)
4. transit van (veh.)

"Fuck. I have left the trannies of the trannies in the back of the tranny."

- A fetish photographer.

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Figure 12. 2003 Urban Dictionary: Tranny

2004



Figure 13. November 2004, *The Gleaner*

“The real Ignacio (Francisco Boira), a drugged-out trannie, collapses over a typewriter while writing and smashes his/her heavily made-up face into the keys.”

2005

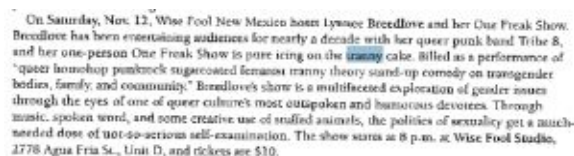


Figure 14. 2005, *Pasatiempo Magazine*

On Saturday, Nov. 12, Wise Fool New Mexico hosts Lynnee Breedlove and her One Freak Show. Breedlove has been entertaining audiences for nearly a decade with her queer punk band Tribe 8, and her one-person One Freak Show is pure icing on the tranny cake. Billed as a performance of “queer homohop punkrock sugarcoated feminist tranny theory.- stand-up comedy on transgender bodies, family, and community,” Breedlove’s show is a multifaceted exploration of gender issues through the eyes of one of queer cultures most outspoken and humorous devotees. Through music, spoken word, and some creative use of stuffed animals, the politics of sexuality get a much needed dose of not-so-serious self-examination.



Figure 15. March 2005, Minnipeg Free Press

“On the other hand, there is a painstaking affirmation of traditional native tolerance to marginal sexuality -- here represented by the aforementioned tranny hookers affiliated with the Indian Posse, a sign, Gonick and co-scriptwriter David McIntosh have compromised their script with agendas of their own, including: How do we make the film homo-erotic?”



Figure 16. October 2005, Associated Press

“I don’t want to call it a split personality -- but sometimes, I feel like a girl. So I put on the costume, what feels comfortable,” says the 18-year-old Chicagoan, who refers to himself as “tranny boy.” The term is deliberately ambiguous, reflecting the gray area in which Polanco exists, where gender is blurred and he feels no obligation to choose female over male -- or vice versa.”



Figure 17. April 2005, *San Francisco Weekly*

“The Tranny Pack - Tonight an all-transgender troupe revives the vaudevillian are for with the”Tranny Roadshow.” a cross-country tour of artists and performers.”

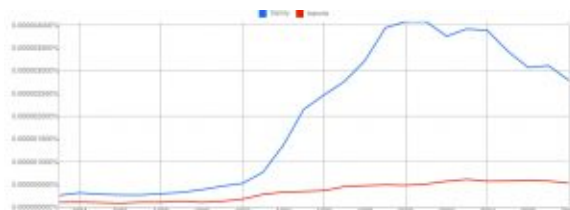


Figure 18. Use of Trannie/Tranny in Books: 1983 - 2008

The above graph reviews the frequency in which the terms “tranny” and “trannie” were used in books published between 1983 and 2008. It’s worth noting that until the 1980s, the term “tranny” referred to any of the following words: transistor, radio, television, photograph or transmission. However, note the rise in the words use between the 1994 - 2001. Since this spike corresponds with a spike in other trans terms, it’s reasonable to conclude that it was in first part of the 1990s that “tranny” entered into common usage by society at large.

Current Contexts

Now that I’ve reviewed the way in which this term was used in a historical context, let’s look at the way our culture currently uses this term:

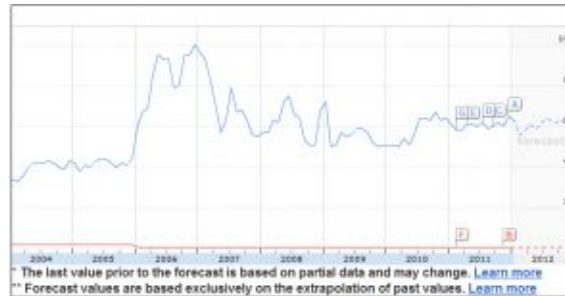


Figure 19. Tranny/Trannie Google search frequency

The above graph is a review of the frequency people use google to search for “tranny” and “trannie” between the years 2003 and 2011. During the last year (2011), a number of incidents account for spikes in the search trends:

- A Neil Patrick Harris Apologizes for “Live!” Tranny-Wreck
- B Being cuckolded with a trannie is rough
- C ‘Shamey tranny’ remark raises ire on Twitter
- D X Factor Pam’s ‘tranny’ email fury
- E Christina Aguilera looks like a tranny
- F ‘Second wife’ turns out to be a trannie
- G Plan B reveals his tranny Plan C at a booze-fuelled Brits aftershow bash

Figure 20. Cultural Context: 2011

Now let's look at exactly what people look for when they're google'n “tranny” and “trannie”:

Top searches			Rising searches		
1.	tranny tube	100	1.	tranny tube	Breakout
2.	tranny sex	100	2.	tranny xxx	+400%
3.	tranny porn	100	3.	sexy tranny	+200%
4.	shemale tranny	95	4.	tranny porn	+180%
5.	shemale	95	5.	free tranny porn	+150%
6.	free tranny	90	6.	tranny movie	+140%
7.	tranny xxx	55	7.	black tranny	+110%
8.	tranny movie	45	8.	tranny videos	+80%
9.	video tranny	40	9.	video tranny	+60%
10.	tranny videos	40	10.	tranny sex	+40%

Figure 21. Cultural Context

How does interest in “tranny” and “trannie” stack up against other trans terms such as “transsexual” and “transgender”?

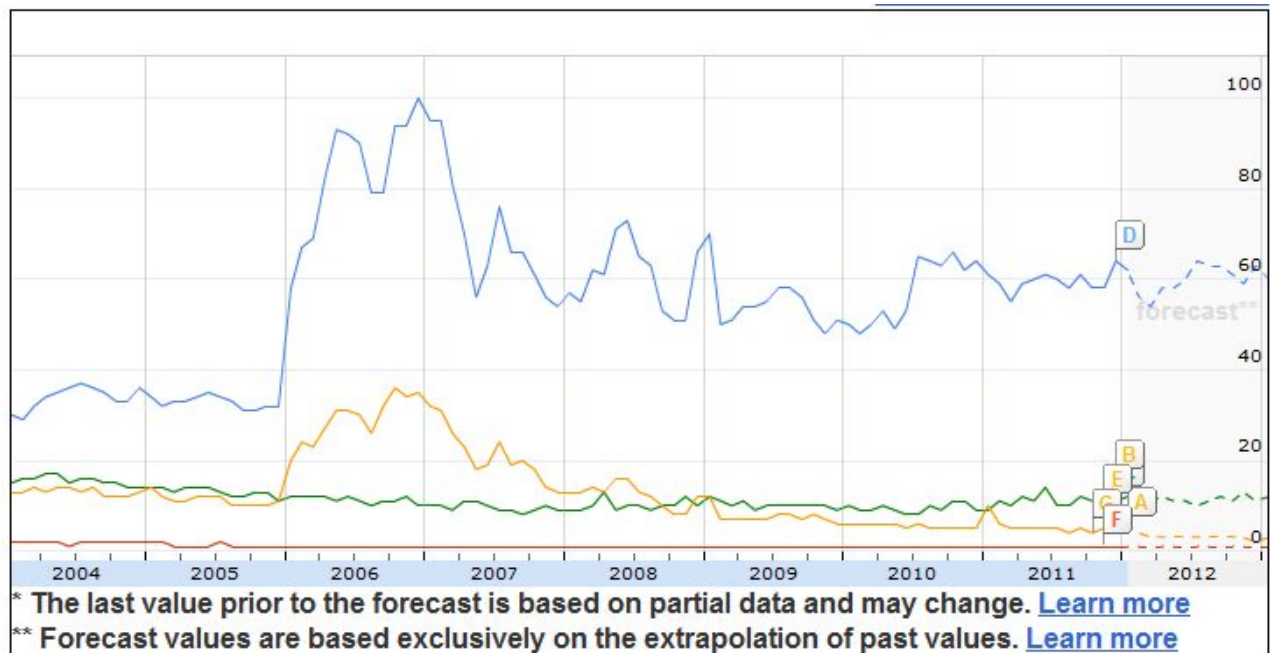


Figure 22. Search volume: Tranny (blue), Trannie (red), Transsexual (yellow) and Transgender (green)

When the data are narrowed to specific categories, interesting trends arise:

- Arts & Entertainment (TV & Video, Online Media):
- Online Communities (Dating & Personals, Forum & Chat Providers):
- People and Society (Ethnic & Identity Groups, Social Issues & Advocacy):
- News (Gossip & Tabloid News, Celebrities & Entertainment News, Newspapers):

(Note: The bars in the graph represent averages for each line on the above chart graph)

Wrap up

From the evidence available to me, I feel that I can draw some conclusions:

- This term seems to have originated from the gay male community.
- This term seems, in its original context, to relate to performers (closely associated with the party culture) of one type or another.
- The term became more closely aligned with the drag community (both FTM and MTF) in the 1980s to mid-1990s.
- The term became more closely aligned with the sex industry in the mid-1990s and this seems to be an upward trend.
- The term dominates google searches by orders of magnitude in most areas (especially in the media) with the exception of specific social causes.
- There seems to be a disconnect between the gay and drag community's uses the term "tranny" and the way the term "tranny" is most commonly used outside of these communities by the society at large.

Some debatable questions:

- What impact does an obviously very popular context of framing the trans experience (tranny) have on social justice movements?
- When the majority clearly associates “tranny” with the sex industry while the gay and drag community associates the term with performance and partying, will this affect the ability of the GLBT community to communicate well?

Suggested citation

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