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We need storytellers who are not cisgender men: why David Marcus' views are misguided and misinformed

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Published April 7, 2014 | Updated March 31, 2026
https://www.transadvocate.com/we-need-storytellers-who-are-not-cisgender-men-why-david-marcus-views-are-misguided-and-misinformed_n_13386.htm

Abstract

In his latest piece for TheFederalist, arts writer David Marcus takes on what he believes to be a great injustice: the inclusion of trans people in a list of playwrights developed to demonstrate that perspectives beyond those of men actually do exist and are readily accessible. The list, a public google document titled "We Exist," [...]

Article

In his latest piece for TheFederalist, arts writer David Marcus takes on what he believes to be a great injustice: the inclusion of trans people in a list of playwrights developed to demonstrate that perspectives beyond those of men actually do exist and are readily accessible. The list, a public google document titled "We Exist," was developed in response to a recent comment by a director at a gathering of professional DC theater folks that there are too few female playwrights to facilitate producing a schedule of shows not dominated by male perspectives. Marcus, rightfully, rejects this notion outright, but from there, his analysis goes right off the rails.

You see, the "We Exist" list came to be a list of writers who are "female and/or trans*" and David takes extraordinary issue with this and proceeds to spend the next 1500 words lashing out and invalidating trans people's identities through a continuous implied skepticism about whether trans women are really women. He starts by readily admitting his own ignorance regarding trans issues and terminology:

"The asterisk after trans is not a footnote its [sic] a...well, I don't understand exactly what it is, but it has replaced "trans" without an apostrophe as the appropriate nomenclature. If your following the terms as they go by."

While the trans vs trans* debate has been on-going in the trans community for years, a relatively simply google research would have turned up a wealth of writing on the topic, giving plenty of explanation of the fact that trans* is a term designed encompass all non-cis gender identities. As far as "trans without an apostrophe," where exactly that statement comes from is unclear, so it's difficult to ascertain whether to attribute it to ignorance or simply poor copy-editing.

Next, David comes so very close to really grasping the point of a list such as this, but somehow just misses the mark:

"When the stories of a group of people numbering more than half our population are excluded, our understanding of gender, and of each other suffers. This is true (though on a much, much smaller scale) of the stories of trans* artists as well. But the experiences and identities of the trans* community cannot be conflated with the experiences and identity of women in general. Pretending these experiences are one and the same may be inclusive and progressive, but it is also dishonest and disempowering...The idea behind gender parity is not that any one woman playwright will embody all women in society, but rather, that by including more women in our story telling we get a broader and better picture of what it is to be a woman in our world. Proponents of including trans* writers in this list argue that their stories are a part of this broad experience of women. But this begs a question, why not simply include these trans* writers as women, with no "and/ors" about it? Why list them separately?"

The question at the end is actually quite a legitimate one in many ways. If the sole purpose of this list was to promulgate the names of women writers, then yes, there's little reason to note that the list is inclusive of trans women. However, the writers of this list went out of their way to specify the larger trans umbrella, which extends beyond binary-identified trans people to include the wide variety of individuals with non-binary identities such genderqueer, genderfluid, agender, etc. David is correct when he states that when women's stories aren't told, "our understanding of gender, and each other, suffer." What he misses, however, is that when the bulk of our storytelling in essentially all media comes from cis-gender men, the trans* characters they write are not created from the direct lived experience of being trans in a cis-dominated culture, so there are very valid reasons for including trans* people in a list like this.

If that had been the end of the Marcus' criticisms, it would be easy to forgive him for his oversight. Sadly, he goes onto attempt to unnecessarily politicize the issue and further demonstrate his lack of knowledge or empathy when it comes to trans issues:

"The reason for changing "women" to "female and/or trans*" is purely political, it literally serves no practical purpose. This is clear because as theater companies peruse the list looking for plays by women, they will have no idea which of the playwrights are trans*.... No longer simply a call for more plays by women, it becomes a demand that theater companies and society as a whole accept these trans* writers as women in exactly the same way as any other woman."

As discussed earlier, describing the people on this list as "female and/or trans" is likely about including a wide variety of perspectives, and there's little reason to ascribe political motivations here, and Marcus gives zero real justification for doing so. Additionally, in his criticism that the list has no way to determine who on it is trans, David completely fails to understand the dangers trans* people of all varieties face in being outed (job loss, housing insecurity, rape, assault, murder, etc), and why perhaps they might be uncomfortable with a very public list containing such personal information. And, as the list contains only a list of names and contact info, it's difficult to see where Marcus draws the inference that the list makes any kind of demand. However, the statement does appear to be a thinly veiled hint that he believes that trans women aren't really women (which will be echoed later in his piece.)

Mr. Marcus then doubles-down on his desire to somehow drag politics into his piece through a completely left-field reference to Chelsea Manning:

"Through the gender bending twist in the Bradley Manning case the question was raised whether we should use the name Chelsea or Bradley, the pronoun him or her and whether he should be sent to a men's or women's prison. In choosing to use the feminine pronoun for Manning liberal media outlets decided he was now a woman. It was a binary choice and did not involve any "ands", "ors" or asterisks. The style guides basically said "use the pronoun the person wants applied to them." By this definition any trans* writer could be considered a woman playwright provided they identify as a woman... But the We Exist list of playwrights goes a significant step further. It does not simply demand that a trans* writer be identified as female (as Manning often is), it demands that women (and all of us) include trans* people who do not even identify as female as women."

First and foremost, it was inappropriate and offensive to refer to Chelsea Manning by her birth name despite her expressed preference, and to misgender her pronouns. Secondly, it feels very much like Marcus has some pretty seriously built up need to complain about this situation, as it has functionally no bearing on the issue at hand. Literally, the only connection is that Chelsea Manning identifies as trans, and the word "trans" appears on this list. David's statement that "liberal media outlets" decided that Manning is "now a woman" is absurd, as, of course, that decision rests with Chelsea alone. The statement regarding "and, ors, or asterisks" again seems to imply that David holds the view that trans women aren't actually women, and that they ought to append some sort explanation to their identity to ensure no one confuses them for "real women." He returns to drawing misguided and unfounded implications of demands made by a list of names by claiming the list demands "all of us" recognize all trans people as women, regardless of claimed identity. Nothing in this list claims anything of the sort. As mentioned before, the term "trans" is implied to include the sum of all non-cis gender identities. If the list were still simply titled "Women" and included non-female-identified trans people, perhaps that claim would hold water. But the list very specifically states "female and/or trans," with the operative word "or" making it quite clear that the list is open to non-female-identified trans people, and that the categories are not necessarily inclusive.

In attempting to further his point that trans* people are somehow eroding the position of cis women in the world, Mr Marcus attempts a clumsy, misguided, uninformed bit of discourse on gender theory:

"It suggest [sic] that a woman can be female and trans*, (as in "I consider myself to be female") as well as simply trans*, with no claim to female identity. In fact it states that being a woman need not have anything to do with being female. But if this is true, do we really need more plays by women? If any man who says he feels like a woman must be considered a woman then why can't a man write women characters or stories about women just as authentically as a woman can?...The nation's storytellers and the progressive academics from whom they receive their terminology (which by the way changes about once every ten minutes) have enormous influence. While most Americans don't have to deal with these questions right now, that will change when their kid gets to college and is politely informed that they are not a man or a woman, but rather cisgendered."

It's here that the underpinnings of Marcus's press to make this issue so political become clearer. It appears that he is attempting to make some sort of statement regarding the difference between "woman" and "female" using (poorly stated and explained) classic biological determinist views, that is, that your biology is what determines whether you are both female and a woman. He fails to understand the distinction between physical sex and gender identity, and in his tirade, manages to categorically

invalidate the gender identity of all transgender women by essentially calling them men. He also perpetuates the offensive, transmisogynistic conservative myth that trans people are simply men claiming to be women for some kind of implied gain. He also returns to the same tired conservative ideologue trope of demonizing "progressive academics" for all things that exist outside his comfort zone (which, if this article is anything to go on, is all things not white and cis). He once again reveals his complete lack of knowledge regarding anything transgender-related in his fear-mongering assertion that students at universities will be told they "are not a man or a woman, but rather cisgender;" cisgender is an adjective the describes individuals who identify as the sex they were assigned at birth and at no point is it even logical (or grammatically correct) to replace "man" or "woman" with the word "cisgender", particularly by force. If perhaps he meant to say that students might be informed that they are "cisgender men" or "cisgender women", then he'd be correct; after all, the point of a universities education into educate, and coming to understand that there are experiences other than your own is an important part of that education (and perhaps a part Marcus managed to miss).

Marcus rounds out his piece by diving into some textbook examples of the conservative desire to maintain the subservience of women by maintaining "traditional" gender beliefs:

"By using this definition we are not demanding that men be more open to the thoughts, feelings or ideas of women, we are demanding that women be more open to having their identity defined for them by men... But in a very real sense that worthy goal is hijacked by redefining of what a woman is. And that redefinition could very easily lead the same producers being urged to produce work by women to favor work that embraces this broad and controversial version of womanhood. In asking producers to do more work by "female and/or trans*" writers we are also asking them to eschew work by women that embraces a more traditional understanding of gender. This is a common tactic in the cultural ground game, and one that conservatives tend to be slow to react to... Generally conservatives fail to act, or even notice until it is much too late, and society begins taking for granted a once controversial position."

Glaringly, it's Marcus, a cisgender man, who is attempting to define what it is to be a woman in a way that's comfortable for him, while simultaneously deriding trans women as men trying to redefine "what a woman is" (and, of course, throwing in one last transphobic invalidation of trans identities while he's at it). His declaration of the view of including transgender women as women as "broad and controversial" and contrasting it to a "traditional understanding of gender" calls to mind standard criticisms of feminism as a whole made by conservatives, as feminists have often been derided for their destruction of "traditional" views of gender and gender roles. The word "traditional" appears to continue to be a conservative dog-whistle for a desire to return to the days where those with privilege (white, male, cis, heterosexual, etc) could exercise it without the inconvenience of being criticized. He also calls upon the tired "culture war" trope, casting the progressive push for trans rights and trans acceptance as some kind of subversive plot that must be thwarted to preserve all things "traditional."

In the end, Marcus has taken something as simple as a list of names with a title on the top and shoehorned it into an excuse to write a lengthy fear-mongering tirade to push his transphobic views. He draws a laundry list of completely unfounded, and downright absurd implications of "demands" being made by the trans* community from a document that doesn't contain a single complete sentence. And, he does this all without apparently doing the slightest bit of preparative research or background reading about the groups he's decided to attack.

Given current dominance of cis men's writing on the stage and on screens large and small, adding diversity to our storytelling is paramount in the entertainment world, and that much David seems to grasp. However, trans* writers of all stripes - transsexual, transgender, genderqueer, genderfluid, neutrois, two-spirit, and more - have unique experiences of their own, and their stories can have significant impacts in our understanding of gender (and ourselves) and they deserve to included in the press for diversities among the arts. The view that somehow desiring including trans* perspectives is an inherent invalidation of the female identity and a slide down some kind slippery slope to excluding women's voices has zero basis in reality.

Did you see a term you're not 100% on? The TransAdvocate has a handy-dandy Glossary of terms!

> *A lot to think about in this thoughtful response to my piece, thanks. @transadvocate http://t.co/9QlKQruc16*
> *-- David Marcus (@BlueBoxDave) April 7, 2014*

Suggested citation

Mari. "We need storytellers who are not cisgender men: why David Marcus' views are misguided and misinformed." TransAdvocate, April 7, 2014.
https://www.transadvocate.com/we-need-storytellers-who-are-not-cisgender-men-why-david-marcus-views-are-misguided-and-misinformed_n_13