

Panoptic Patriarchy and the Gap Between Queer Lives

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In all media outlets, particularly literature, a tension has always existed between works that challenge gender performance and those that conform to it. Patriarchal societies have traditionally privileged works that construct and perpetuate normative gender performances over those of queer gender performances. Those who do not adhere to the expected expressions of gender and identity are often ostracized and deemed social lepers. Although this is not the case in Jennifer Finney Boylan's transgender memoir, *She's Not There*, the text provides an optimal medium for examining expressions of gender and how they are societally regulated through the social model of panopticism. Boylan's memoir illustrates the functioning of panopticism within one's own expression of identity and social structures governing that identity. Societal panopticism forces authors of queer texts, specifically Jennifer Finney Boylan, to internalize their gender performance and conform to patriarchal standards within their texts in order to prevent social punishment that could arise from a lack of adherence to gendered norms.

An individual's gender performance is one of the most visible aspects of their identity and because of this, one of the most highly regulated societal norms within patriarchal structures. From birth, biological sex is artificially assigned to every individual and from then on the individual is forced to adhere to preconstructed notions of gender performances. Whether an individual is male or female, these gender performances regulate nearly every aspect of their lives in patriarchal society. It is also assumed by the established patriarchal system that the individual's gender will reflect their assigned sex. Individuals who do not conform to the

gender expectations and expressions of their biological sex are often seen as abnormal, grotesque, and threatening to other members of society. This is especially true for transgender individuals who present the epitome of an aesthetic lack of adherence to their sex assigned at birth. As an expression of gender identity, transgender individuals transgress all pre-established modes of gender expression and, because of this, present a radical challenge to patriarchal notions of identity. As a sub-genre of queer texts, transgender texts often present narratives that are foreign to mainstream readers. This foreignness can pose challenges to whether the text is accepted or not within patriarchal society which functions as an entity to evaluate, regulate, and cast out the abnormal, grotesque, and foreign.

The social theory of panopticism, according to Michel Foucault, is that individuals regulate and police their own behavior, as well as the behaviors of those around them, due to the possibility of being observed and punished by other members of society if they are caught transgressing (Foucault 497). Although the punishment is executed by society as a whole, it is really only one central observer who is powerful through their ability to observe and inflict judgement on others. As each individual in society is perceived by those around them as this central observer, every person is perceived to have the backing of the whole society. Everyone's visibility within their own social spheres then acts as an invisible force that regulates and polices individuals to present behaviors that are in line with societal norms (Foucault 501). All individuals are then both the watchers and the watched. If one does not present the appropriate behaviors, they risk punishment by the rest of

society (Foucault 501). Normalized gendered acts such as putting on makeup and dressing in accordance with one's assigned sex exist are then perceived as both necessary and appropriate behaviors for women to participate in. In her memoir, *She's Not There*, Jennifer Boylan's regulatory gender performances are explained by panopticism as it is a method of surveying and policing her identity. In *Compelling Confessions: The Politics of Personal Disclosure*, Suzanne Diamond argues that, like individuals in society, "[t]he autobiographer [...] is always vulnerable because always visible, as she displays herself to the panoptical gaze of an audience who is both invisible and potentially critical" (Diamond 68). The panoptic nature of modern societies, and literature specifically, forces Boylan to normalize and minimize the aspects of her autobiography that could be viewed as threatening or uncomfortable to readers who are all individually acting as the central watchers in panopticism. If she were to present a dialogue that did not adhere to her audience's normative expectations, she risks criticism and social rejection.

As a professor, Boylan is constantly observed by students, academic peers, other community members, and even close family and friends such as Richard Russo. Throughout the text, Russo embodies the powerful individual in the panopticon who deems Jenny's transgender identity invalid because it does not adhere to established modes of gender expression. Russo executes this policing when he says, "You say Jenny is the real you, but we see an actor learning a role" (Boylan 183). By saying "we," he determines for himself and the rest of social sphere that her gender identity is an acting role. Russo also stands in for society as a whole to represent the overarching patriarchal norm that deems any gender performance that is incongruent with assigned sex as invalid. As Russo is Jenny's

best friend, she is constantly visible to him and therefore constantly subject to his panoptic gaze. This constant visibility is an essential facet of panopticism in which society prevents the individual, Boylan here, from acting outside of the social expectations. "To be 'constantly seen' is required of the autobiographer" regardless of whether or not they desire it (Diamond 68). By publishing and maintaining a presence as a public figure, Boylan subjects herself to a visibility that cannot be revoked or moderated. Her memoir becomes a medium through which other individuals, and society more largely, can judge, moderate, and police her behavior. Through this, Boylan's gender expression in her memoir becomes an entity that readers feel entitled to evaluate and critique. Due to her constant panoptic visibility in both her autobiography and profession, Boylan acts in accordance with the gendered expectations of the sex she is presenting. Both pre-transition and post-transition, Boylan presents a normalized gender performance to the public.

When Boylan presents female pre-transition, she feels nervous and anxious that someone will notice her and call her out on her lack of adherence to gendered norms. In Amsterdam, while she presenting female and emotionally preparing herself to exit the room, bell captain enters and says, "Pardon me, madam. I thought you were the chambermaid" (Boylan 118). Her ability to pass as female pre-transition is one of the few aspects of the narrative that could potentially subvert gender expression. However, because of the potential challenge to panoptic and patriarchal institutions, Boylan presents the experience as one of fear and uncertainty. Because Boylan's behaviors are not ones that adhere to the expectations of patriarchal gender expression, she expresses fear to show her awareness that she is acting in a way that is not socially acceptable according to normative expectations. This reiterates her

internalization of panoptic structures and therefore renders the experience unthreatening to individuals who have already internalized the existing structures. The potential threat to the panoptic structure forces her autobiography, as an entity, to a rigorous normalization in order to render it harmless. Boylan employs a strategy of fictionalization through form as a method of presenting a text that is not as foreign or potentially threatening to readers. By writing a memoir that is reminiscent of a novel, Boylan can slide through some of the more harsh judgements of gender performance and minimize risk of social punishment by panopticism. This form, unfortunately, presents Boylan's memoir in accordance with the internalization of gendered performances.

Both before and after her transition, Boylan publicly expresses behaviors that conform to the societal expectations for how both men and women should behave, dress, and think. According to Judith Butler, gender is a performance that is learned by imitating performances of gender by other individuals (Butler 331). As a transgender individual, Boylan's gender performance is one that is learned by observing other women and their expressions of femininity and femaleness. Unfortunately for Boylan, the gender expressions she imitates are those that perpetuate the institution of patriarchal norms and expectations. Where Boylan's memoir could have been an opportunity to queer the expectations of gender performance, her performance is just code-switching within the panoptic structures governing society. Throughout the text, Boylan makes a variety of gendered comments that exhibit her internalization of patriarchal expressions of gender. She simultaneously fails to question the root of these assumptions or why they are made. Her blind adherence to these norms exhibits the omnipresent power of panopticism within society. As Boylan lives in a patriarchal society, the panoptic lens is

also one of patriarchy and because of this, we see Boylan adhering to patriarchal expectations of women and men.

Early in the text, Boylan's internalization of gender norms is seen through her thoughts while with Stacey and Ashley. Boylan sums up her acquiescence to patriarchal expectations in two references: regular verses Diet Coke and bra wearing. When Boylan says, "It would be my official reintroduction to the college community since I'd switched from regular to Diet Coke," she doesn't acknowledge the gendered assumptions of why women drink Diet Coke (Boylan 9). Her lack of recognition that there are structures and social pressures that result in women drinking Diet Coke forces into sharp consideration conversations of women's body image and the patriarchal beauty standard, both of which Boylan is now subject to as a woman. Boylan's internalization of patriarchal expectations is also evident through her commentary on the girls' clothing, or more specifically, lack thereof. While they are picking up the dog at Speed Racers, she says, "At that moment I realized neither of the girls was wearing a bra. I rather wished that they were, I thought as Speed Racer licked his lips (Boylan 11). Although Speed Racer is the one who is looking hungrily at the girls, Boylan criticizes the girls for their physical presentation instead of criticizing him for his objectification. She does not bring into consideration that women are not at fault for their own sexual objectification. As a method of identification, Boylan's references to beauty standards and female objectification are ones that many women will understand and identify with. Her adherence to the patriarchal panopticism of society allows for women to more easily identify with her story preventing her ostracization as a transgender woman. This also means, however, that women reading Boylan's story are not presented with the opportunity to understand

the societal structures governing their lives and expressions of their gender.

Although Boylan's use of gender norms does lend itself to her readers being more easily able to identify with her, it also expresses the invasive nature of panoptic visibility and how its pervasiveness can infect every aspect of a person's existence. Boylan's normalization of gender expressions, such as wearing skirts and drinking Diet Coke, are expressions of femininity expected by patriarchal panopticism. Even as an individual who has been perceived as alternately male and then female, Boylan is completely unchallenging of the restrictive structures regulating women's aesthetics and behaviors. As a participant in patriarchal panopticism, she is subject to expressing her gender identity through the pre-existing structures that already moderate gender expression regardless of her individual gender. This is evident through Boylan's position as a professor. Before her transition, Boylan iterates that she tells the female students in her class that they should not say their names like they are a question. She says, "Say your names like you are proud of them. Your *identity* is not a question" (Boylan 6). However, after her transition, Boylan says she found "that same inflection often snuck into [her] own voice" (Boylan 6). By conforming to the expected voice inflections, whether consciously or not, Boylan is able to more closely conform to the panoptic expectations of patriarchal society and not incur as much social backlash. If she were not to acquiesce to these, Boylan would face a possibility of punishment from her non-conformity to the societally acceptable performances of gender. However, the punishments that Boylan no doubt experiences for the moments when she is caught transgressing from the permitted gender performances are not evident at all within the text. She even goes so far as to say

in the notes at the back of her memoir, "In order to make its rendition *tolerable*, certain moments have been gently altered—by[...] *blithely skipping over unpleasantness*" (emphasis my own, Boylan 323). Boylan's removal of moments that could potentially unsettle readers illuminates the necessity of her adherence to patriarchal panopticism. If Boylan were to present these moments, they would directly challenge readers by forcing them to confront harsh realities and unpleasantness that result from discrimination. Her challenge to patriarchal panopticism would risk her own social acceptability and potentially her professional success as a writer.

The patriarchal policing that Boylan is subject to illustrates the invasive nature of both panopticism and patriarchy. As separate structures, both seek to moderate and control behaviors of individuals based on pre-existing structures and conventions. When combined, patriarchal panopticism acts as an all-knowing, regulatory force which imposes expectations for gender performances on both men and women. Jennifer Boylan, as an individual and in her memoir *She's Not There*, is subject to the rampart policing of individuality done by patriarchal panopticism and submit to the structure due to the possibility of social punishment and rejection that is the alternative. As a lens for examining *She's Not There* and queer memoir more largely, panopticism allows readers insight into why queer memoirists, specifically Boylan, are crippled by panopticism in their own lives and by extension, their memoirs. Boylan presents a queer text marred by a panoptically patriarchal society yet still attempting to explain and illuminate the challenges faced in queer lives.

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