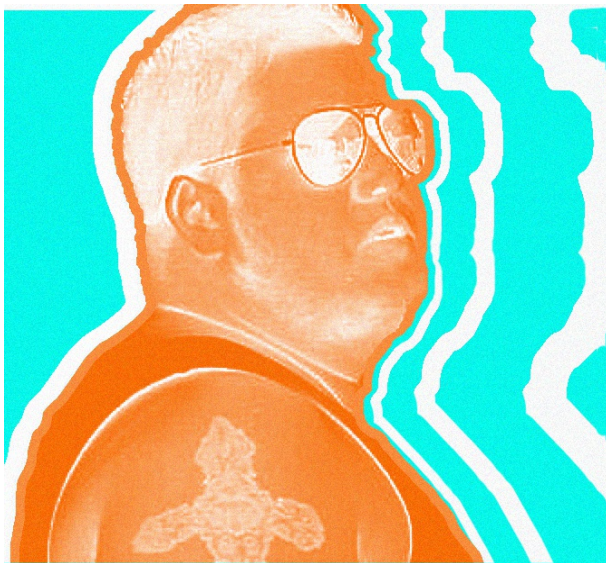


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Becoming Chaz: The Making of Masculinity

March 4, 2014 By [pia](#) 2 Comments

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by [Kalil Cohen](#)

Chaz Bono's body has been a focus of media attention for the past five years, from when he publicly came out as transgender in 2009 to his latest highly publicized weight loss efforts featured on the reality show *The Doctors*. Throughout this time, he's been both the subject and object of media coverage. As an interview subject and star of the documentary *Becoming Chaz*, he has presented his physical transition with complexity, emphasizing the social and interpersonal elements of transitioning from female to male, as well as documenting and sharing the process of physically altering his body. For someone in the mainstream media, Chaz has done a fairly impressive job of keeping the conversation about his transition more complex than a single sound bite and not trying to represent all transgender people single handedly.

As an object of media coverage, including in tabloid magazines and commentary on his reality show appearances on *Dancing with the Stars* and *The Doctors*, there's been a less nuanced approach to Chaz's identity. In these media outlets, the primary emphasis of commentary has been on his physical transition, including conjectures about when he might get penile surgery and negative scrutiny about his weight.

This media coverage has largely continued the trend in viewing transgender people through the myopic lens of physicality.

His latest series of television appearances and interviews, which focus on his weight, can be read as progress for the media in a small way, however. The fact that there is more to his story—and more to his relationship with his body—than just his gender is a notable shift

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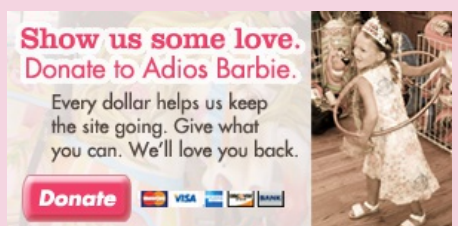
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toward greater complexity when representing the lives of transgender people on TV. For example, *The Enquirer* ran an article showing a photo of Chaz sweating and looking concerned, with the reporter speculating that Chaz was at risk for a heart attack due to his weight, with a passing mention that taking testosterone could also increase the risk of a heart attack. The fact that this tabloid could cover Chaz Bono with a focus other than his gender is significant, and also speaks to the depth of media obsession with weight for people of all genders.

This cultural emphasis on body size and shape under the guise of concern for peoples' health is a frequent aspect of reality TV. From *The Biggest Loser* to *My 600 Pound Life*, there is a veneer of concern for the health of the participants, even though there is a great deal of evidence that extreme dieting and fast weight-loss do not lead to permanent weight loss, or even support holistic health and wellness for individuals. Similarly, the media's concern over Chaz's body has an aspect of accepting him as transgender and appears to come from a well-meaning desire for him to feel comfortable in his body. Yet this impetus to "help" him reinforces a narrow gender binary. The implication is that in his need to become a "real man," Chaz must change the shape of his body through weight loss and surgery, for "real men" are lean and ripped.

After losing a significant amount of weight on *The Doctors*, Chaz underwent liposuction surgery to remove excess skin, during which surgeons contoured his abs to appear "more masculine". This leads me to wonder if there is a difference between this type of plastic surgery and those surgeries more frequently referred to as gender reassignment surgeries, such as surgery to remove breasts for transgender men or augment breasts for transgender women, as well as genital surgeries. Is there a difference between Chaz Bono, a transgender man, having further plastic surgery that is a combination of a weight-related surgery and gender-related surgery, as opposed to a cisgender person having liposuction to create a "more masculine" or "more feminine" appearance?

As a young feminist I was against all plastic surgery, believing it to be a means of reproducing oppressive body image expectations upon ourselves. I saw this as a sign that the person choosing to have plastic surgery was actively supporting patriarchy. When I first came out as transgender and realized that I wanted to have top surgery, I was challenged to reconsider my perspective. Suddenly, upon seeing myself as someone seeking plastic surgery, I was less clear about the line between someone who blindly accepts social norms around body image and someone choosing to reshape one's own body as part of a process of navigating the gendered world in which we live. Are surgeries that create sex-based characteristics such as breasts, penis or vagina clearly delineated as gender-reassignment surgeries? What about surgeries, like ab contouring or augmenting calf musculature—are they part of gender-reassignment, or simply a way that people recreate and reinforce unhealthy gender norms? What about facial feminization surgery for transgender women? This reshaping of the facial bones can allow transgender women to appear more similar to cisgender women, thereby increasing their safety in everyday life in a society where transgender women are at the greatest risk of violent hate crimes.

In trying to distinguish different surgeries as serving different functions and having different meanings, I am struck by the impossibility of defining gender-reassignment surgeries as inherently separate from all other plastic surgeries. In reality, there are fewer clear distinctions between the appearance of men and women than we typically assume.

For instance, there are cisgender women with full beards, cisgender men with large breasts, and cisgender people with every different variation of facial feature and "ab contour" there is. There are obviously clusters of features more common to cisgender men and to cisgender women, but the gray area between the two is infinite, and attempts to draw a clear line between them is both inaccurate and serves to reinforce the gender binary.

As I ask myself if we can we genuinely separate out some types of plastic surgery as affirming, while vilifying others as damaging, I am acutely aware of the discomfort I feel. If I cannot distinguish between the plastic surgery that I underwent from mainstream "Hollywood" plastic surgeries, how can I retain a sense of moral superiority over people

whom I see as actively reinforcing the gender binary? To be fully honest with myself, I cannot. And perhaps this is a good thing. How does it help me or my political beliefs to keep myself separate, apart, and above all the millions of people who are also suffering in our society due to oppressive gendered social norms? We all are affected by expectations around gender and appearance, and we each make a choice in how we will navigate that oppressive condition. I chose to alter my body to feel more comfortable with myself and in the world, as have so many millions of others who have also had elective plastic surgery.

While I am unable to clearly categorize and differentiate different types of surgeries as gender-reassignment surgeries vs. elective plastic surgery (with the associated implication that some are “good” and some are “bad”) I do think the experience of having surgery can feel very different. As I look to find common ground with others who have had plastic surgery, a person’s motivation makes a difference to me. One distinction I can see is that my safety is more impacted because top surgery allows me appear to be cisgender, and visibly transgender individuals are at much greater risk of physical violence than cisgender folks. When I think of more subtle motivations than physical safety, I wonder if a person’s choice is an act of running away from a hated physical self or of welcoming in a new physicality that one is excited to attain. If I wish to accept my own choices, however, I am compelled to accept those of every person who has chosen to alter their physical body, regardless of the motivation. In many ways this is a relief. It allows me to put down the burden of judgment and separation, and embrace every person as experiencing gender oppression and simply doing the best they can to cope with this overwhelming cultural reality.

We have all been deeply affected by the damaging messages in our culture, including the emphasis on separation from and judgment of our bodies. Transitioning physically did not heal all body issues that Chaz has experienced, a common experience for people who physically alter their bodies. As Chaz mentioned in *The Doctors*, his weight is connected to childhood issues, some of which are unrelated to his gender identity. I would love to see a story in the media where Chaz more fully opens up about his complex relationship with his body. What is the intersection between his feelings about his gender identity and his experience of cultural norms regarding body shape and size? How is his body image related to his gender identity? Additionally, has his experience of being exposed in the media felt different when he is being discussed and judged on his appearance on the basis of gender vs. body size?

What we ultimately need is an open and accepting conversation in the media regarding how different people experience oppressive messages around their bodies and what choices they are making to cope with this reality. Given the current state of mainstream media I won’t be holding my breath for this one. At the same time, there is a myriad of online sources (including *Adios Barbie*) that foster this type of discussion, which provides room for those wishing dig deeper into the issues of body image and identity and find others to engage in this conversation openly.

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Comments

Bamby Salcedo says:

March 7, 2014 at 7:44 pm



Thanks Kalil for sharing your thoughts. I often times question the same paradigms. Thanks for bringing light to this issue. Abrazos 😊

Jordan says:

March 7, 2014 at 3:47 pm



What a good article. As a trans person myself you brought up issues I haven't even thought about before. I'm thankful for celebrities like Janet Mock and Chaz Bono for broadening the trans issues discussed by the media, and for thoughtful articles like this.

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