

TRANSGENDER IDENTITY AND DIALECTICS OF REAL AND UNREAL: AN ANALYSIS OF JANET MOCK'S *REDEFINING REALNESS*

Surinder KAUR

Department of English

S.G.A.D. Govt. College, Tarn Taran, Punjab, India.

Email: sandhu.surinder85@gmail.com

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Abstract

This endeavour focuses on Janet Mock's memoir Redefining Realness (2014) from the perspective of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. According to Butler, gender is not the natural part of the body but only a performance reinforced through a human's behaviour and actions. Hence masculine and feminine are performative acts. Society demands an unquestioning conformity to gender from its individuals for its smooth functioning. Those individuals whose behaviour is non-conformist or deviates from the norm are shunned by the majority. This puts enormous pressure on these individuals to follow normal ways to integrate themselves as a part of society. Trans individuals often 'pass' as cis to safeguard themselves from verbal and physical violence and also this reaffirms a transgender individual's identity. However, passing can be seen as deceptive or hiding one's true identity. Since passing signifies a performance, some believe passing for transgender individuals simply means passing as man or woman. This supposition leads to the idea that "passing as cisgender" means a cis person is real and a transgender person is unreal. Basing the analysis on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, I posit that Mock urges us to see beyond heterosexual binaries and allow for a space for transgender people to be themselves. They are worthy of respect and love. In order to make a harmonious progress, we need to break the shackles of age old psychological conditioning to read a person in terms of body, gender and clothing. We must read and value an individual based on his/her capabilities, potential and his/her contribution to the upliftment of the society.

Keywords: Gender, Transgender, Cisgender, Identity, Real, Space, Performance

Introduction

Gender Blind World

*We humans, the supreme creation of God
 Our words a proof of His ingenuity
 Our actions make Him feel proud
 Our behaviour be such sweet and soft
 That ails not an idle stone.
 Alas! Divided selves between bodies and types
 Attaching undue importance to norms and sex
 And gender, divider, a creator of fissure and difference
 Disgracingly embracing the orthodoxy become myopic
 We judge, ridicule and reject as masters of perfection
 Hurt fellow beings with the arrows of sight and word.
 Must overcome bodily bias lest His dream falls apart
 And only deliverance from flesh bodies' desire and want
 A gender free world, a world of charisma and courage
 With talent and service to humanity our sole recognition.
 --Source: own*

In the novel *The Passion of New Eve* (Carter 1977), Mother of the land aims to create “a perfect specimen of womanhood” (68). She castrates Evelyn (a man) and turns him into Eve (a woman). This sex change is a “psycho-surgery” (Carter 1977, 68) and it is in two parts. The first part is a plastic surgery which transforms him into her biologically, and the second part is a psychological programming to instil stereotypical feminine qualities via daily dose of woman videos. This programming is designed to enable him to “adjust to (his/her) new shape” (Carter 1977, 72) and to establish a correlation between his new sex and its gender identity. All societies follow naturally considered inter-connected sexual and gender binaries and expect its people to abide by the laws i.e. man is masculine and female is feminine by nature and practice same unquestioningly. In order to be a specimen of perfect woman, Eve(lyn) has to internalize the feminine traits so that she can meet the gender expectations of his sex correctly and to be read as woman. The question arises if females are feminine by nature then Eve(lyn)’s sex change is enough for him to behave like a woman, why s/he has to watch the videos to learn femininity? And this is what Janet Mock explores in her *Memoir* that a body’s sex is not the only and true determiner of how a body feels. But we are culturally programmed to view a body’s sex and its feelings¹ as interconnected and natural. In all societies, there are individuals who feel “uneasy in their bodies” (McKinney 2005, 64), who do not identify with some (or all) of the aspects of gender that are assigned to their biological sex. Some of these individuals are transgender. According to Stryker, the term ‘transgender’ describes those individuals who “move away from the gender

they were assigned at birth” (2008, 1). He clarifies that the trans- in transgender means, “[crossing] over the boundaries constructed by... culture to define and contain... gender” (Stryker 2008, 1). Contrary to transgender are cisgender. ‘Cisgender’ term is used to describe individuals who do not question their gender identity or expression or who feel that they align with their gender assigned at birth (Marine and Catalano 2014, Stryker 2008).

Human body has always been the subject of learned discussion. “Of all the objects in the world, the human body has a peculiar status: it is not only possessed by the person who has it, it also possesses and constitutes him (Miller 1978, 14). Our bodies’ behaviour is largely determined and regulated by social and cultural rules. As Michael Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality* that “our bodies are trained, shaped and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity and femininity” (1990, 166). Bodies are controlled, supervised and continuously moulded to fit within the constraints of heterosexuality. Bodies that do not behave as dictated are considered inappropriate, unacceptable and are punished and suppressed. Strict heteronormative stereotypes associates transgender identity with poor mental health, particularly the diagnosis of “gender identity disorder” or “gender dysphoria.”² This puts enormous pressure on individuals with queer bodies such as transgender people to adopt the normal ways of life to appear and to be accepted as normal. Ricki Lewis notes that,

Transgender is a poorly understood condition related sexual identity. A transgendered individual has the phenotype and sex chromosomes of one gender, but identifies extremely strongly with the opposite gender. It is a much more profound condition than transvestitism, which refers to a male who prefers women’s clothing. The genetic or physical basis of transgender is not known. Some affected individuals have surgery to better match their physical selves with the gender that they feel certain they are.³(2017)

The following graph represents biological sex and aligning gender:

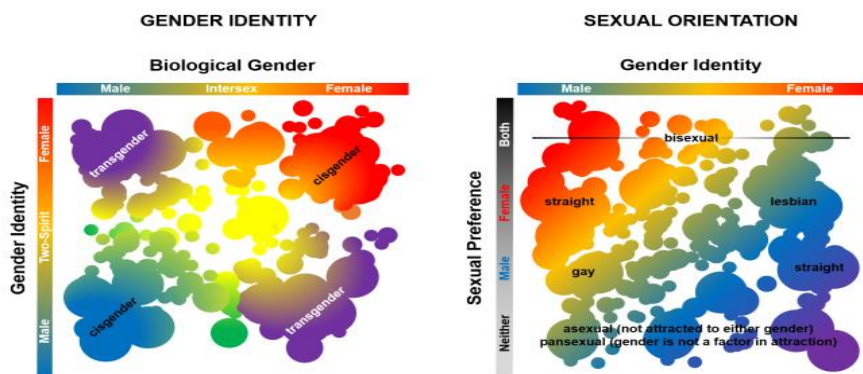


Figure 1: Graphs defining the traditional understanding of biological sex and gender conformities.⁴ By Brad Wierbowski October 25, 2016. Source:

<http://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2016/gender-lines-science-transgender-identity/>

Transgender people often feel forced to ‘pass’ as straight people since it employs safety and social acceptance while revealing true identity means violence, disrespect and discrimination. They adopt ‘passing’ as a measure to safeguard themselves against the prejudice of a handful individuals’ myopic misplaced vision of a perfect society.

Basing the analysis on Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, the proposed endeavour attempts to analyse the concept of real gender by examining transgender memoir *Redefining Realness* (2014) by Janet Mock⁵. I posit that Mock urges us to end inhibitive gender system that negatively impact a [trans] individual and can lead to “psychological distress...maladaptive, [and/or] suicidal behaviours” (Devor 2004, 46). Instead of using ‘passing’ as a shield, trans people should remain loyal to their selves and should evolve as fuller beings. She herself has embraced her reality and shares her story. Janet Mock also raises a valid point that a harmonious progress is possible only when we read and value an individual based on his/her capabilities, potential and his/her contribution to the upliftment of the society and not in terms of his/her body type and sex. First it is imperative to understand the theoretical terms.

The Concept of Passing

Transgender people often pay big price for “gender nonconformity” (Reicherzer 2008, 330) as those who wholeheartedly believe in a “gender system as real and natural use gender to terrorize those who violate the established system” (Bornstein 1994, 71-72). That’s why transgender people rarely disclose their real identity and pass as straight individuals from the fear of social out casting. The concept of “Passing” dates back to eighteenth century meaning then, hiding one’s race or sexuality and passing as the privileged race or sexuality. Black individuals passed as white in the U.S in order to escape slavery and later to escape discrimination and to get economic gain. Hence to “pass” denotes an act of being something you are not in reality. Passing calls for an erasure of one’s true self in the presence of others so “passing” is perceived as a performance. Today, the concept of passing is associated with transgender individuals. It is often reduced down to a “good/bad” dichotomy. Passing as cisgender can ensure safety, an escape from verbal and physical violence and it can reaffirm a transgender individual’s identity. However, passing can be seen as deceptive or hiding one’s true identity. Since passing signifies a performance, some believe passing for transgender individuals simply means passing as man or woman. This supposition leads to the idea that “passing as cisgender” means a cis person is real and a transgender person is unreal.

Gender Performativity Theory

Gender is considered as the natural part of a body's sex. Delphy, a French materialist feminist, quotes Ann Oakley's following definition (*Sex, Gender and Society*, published in 1972) to clear the differences:

'Sex' is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. 'Gender', however, is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into 'masculine' and 'feminine' (qtd. in Delphy 1996, 33).

This definition hints that although bodies are categorized according to masculine and feminine roles but these gender roles are not natural essences of a body but are socially defined roles and cultural constructs only to regulate people's behaviour. Judith Butler goes a step further, proposing that gender is not a part of an essential identity, but is discursively constructed or displayed in performative acts. Judith Butler developed her theories on feminism in 1990, 1993 and 2004. Collapsing the sex/gender distinction, Butler argues that there is no sex that is not always already gender. All bodies are gendered from the beginning of their social existence (and there is no existence that is not social), which means that there is no "natural body" that pre-exists its cultural inscription. This seems to point towards the conclusion that gender is not something one *is*, it is something one *does*, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a "doing" rather than a "being" (Butler 1990, 25). Butler elaborates this idea in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler 1990, 25). Butler, like Foucault, views discourse as productive of the identities they appear to be describing. When a baby is born and the midwife announces "It's a girl," she is not reporting a new matter but participates in a practice which constitutes that matter. The effect of repetition of acts of this kind is to make it appear that there are two distinct natures, male and female and two distinct genders, masculine and feminine. Gender and feminist critics have questioned the concept that sex is nature and gender is a direct copy of sex. Gender is a cultural construct and it "is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real" (Butler 1990, X). If one possesses a female body, one is expected to display feminine features and if one possesses a male body, one is expected to display masculine characteristics. Instead of being an authentic representation of sexed bodies, gender is "the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place" (Butler 2004, 42). Since the gender is fundamentally socially constructed, the gendered behaviour is the performance, rather than the true representation, of one's natural essences. Gender norms are imposed on bodies to maintain the apparent coherence of gender dichotomy. Hence, Femininity and Masculinity become, broadly, bodily styles which our bodies incorporate to yield a gendered subjectivity. Gender can be like clothing, a disguise what Irigaray calls a masquerade, a performance, in which appearance masks 'reality' and one cannot tell clearly precisely what one has seen" (qtd in. Robbins 2000, 210). Gender is only performed in order to comply with the

dominant discourse of society. Hence trans people when ‘pass’ as straight people are merely participating in this gender performance activity. However, they are often portrayed as “leading a life of tragic duplicity and as deceivers who will be punished harshly by society when their true identity is uncovered” (Mock 2014, 155). The question arises if gender itself is a performance then how can a cis person’s gender performance is counted as real and honest while transgender’s performance as cisgender is dubbed as unreal and dishonesty?

Redefining Realness

Prefaced as the book of “truth and personal history”, *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More* (2014) is a memoir by self-identified Black trans⁶ woman Janet Mock about the “confession of the flesh,” about her journey to self-realization, happiness, and love (Mock 2014, XI, Foucault 1990, 19). Referring overtly to African –American woman novelists and critics⁷, this memoir is a story of “hope and possibilit(y)...reality of...lived experience” teaching us “better how to live, but how to dream” (Mock 2014, xvii). Mock’s memoir shows that although she has gender confirmation surgery and can pass as cisgender, she does not wish to hide her trans identity, and instead wishes to tell her “truth.” The central importance [is] on the lives and experiences of [marginalized] diverse groups” while “[studying] the way oppression is structured and reproduced” (Mertens 2015, 21). Mock debunks the belief that passing is the ultimate goal of trans people as they want to be and read to be as cisgender. For her “realness” is an alternative to “passing” and it provides a space for trans individuals to be themselves without being seen as duplicitous and considered unnatural. As Marcie Bianco notes, for Janet, “Realness is not “passing,” neither is it “conforming.” ... What a person can do is to speak her “truth”—she can speak who she is, give agency to her being, and wrest control of herself and her body from the dominant culture” (2014) Similarly, over time, for Janet being ‘real’ means living in her truth, participating in loving relationships, being accountable to others, and following her passions.”

Male Sex: Female Desires

Proposing the destabilization of “hegemonic cultural ideals of normativity” (Smith 2003, 346), Mock writes that we as individuals are much more than our bodies. We may be labelled differently because of our bodies, but this labelling has nothing to do with how we feel. Mock narrates her journey from her childhood feeling of womanhood as opposed to her body’s sex (male) to her becoming a woman with sex surgery. Her experience emphasizes that womanhood and femininity are not mutually constituted. Femininity, as Mock suggests and as Butler notes, is an expression of gender, while womanhood implies an affirmed corporeal embodiment and psychic fortitude. Reflecting on her girlhood growing up, Mock says, “I always knew I was a girl” (Mock 2014, 16). She loved dresses and one day “resisting oppressive social constructions” (Abes and Kasch 2007, 620), she wore a dress⁸ and run to the park feeling the dress flirting with her skin. For her family, this behaviour

was inappropriate for a boy, as her mother scolds, “you are not supposed to wear dresses” (Mock 2014, 21). Mock constantly reminds us that girl inside her did not look for validity from the “gender defender” (Bornstein 1994, 72) society but for an expression. Her biological sex was a big threat to this as others expect her to behave on the conventional gender lines and be masculine. Punishment for wearing dress and haircut were meant to cut and hammer the girl out of her. But these acts did an “irreparable damage” (Mock 2014, 32). When her friend’s father tries to molest her, “the girl-child inside” (Mock 2014, 49) feels the oppression and this incident leaves a deep scar on her psyche. The clash between Mock’s male body and her female desires continues till she finds courage to express openly her woman self. Mock tells us in the Introduction that this book is about those parts of our lives that we often silence and put behind the doors of subconscious from the fear of societal shame and hostility we may face if we openly express them. It also stresses the point that becoming a woman is a process, an experience, an essence and not only a matter of surgery. Our feelings are our natural essences regardless of our sex. Later, her mother too accepts her as her daughter and tells her “You were just always like that. Very sensitive, very mischievous, too smart for your own good, and always into my things.” (Mock 2014, 115-116)

‘I have to tell you’⁹

One important aspect of human life is love. Without love, human life is like barren land. It is a “language that all the world speak- the language that everyone on earth [is] capable of understanding in their heart” (Coelho 1992, 97). True love demands honesty and truth. Mock narrates that after few dates with her boyfriend, Aaron, she realizes that if she wants to have a true and profound loving relationship, she must tell him about her transsexuality, she must lay before him “the self.... (She) knows, the ...deep inside” (Mock 2014, 11). She remembers how she “grabbed the courage” and confessed to Aaron (Mock 2014, 11). Although she was told to keep her story a secret, she tells everything to Aaron and to her readers, from how she was sexually molested as a child to how she flew to Thailand for her bottom surgery. She feels relieved after the confession and when Aaron kisses her, she acknowledges those kisses as “freedom kisses” (Mock 2014, 12), a freedom from the burden of being dishonest and a freedom from the burden of hiding her reality as Halberstam notes that transgender person’s not confessing his real identity, and pass as cisgender recasts “the act of passing as deception, dishonesty and fraud” (2001, 48). Mock rejects this deception and comes forward to admit the truth about herself. Her purpose in writing this book is to be real, and telling real stories is a double-edged revolutionary act. It may result in rejection and violence but it may also lead to love, understanding and community. Hence her realness means expressing everything, though embarrassing and possibly having serious consequences but it also means asserting real identity to have a real loving relationship and not just “going from being unambiguous man...to unambiguous woman.” (Stone 1992, 225).

Beauty and Femininity

Beauty is considered a vital element of the female self. Meeting the beauty standards of the time is important for women, “if they don’t try to fit this ideal, the penalties are enormous: their social legitimacy is at stake” (Firestone 2013, 126). Beautiful women are considered more feminine. For trans women, beauty becomes a way to express their validity or “realness” and worth as a woman. They are expected to “perform hyper-feminine presentation, to be as close to heteronormativity as possible” (Diaz qtd in Sicardi 2015). Hence a cis woman’s beauty is real while a transgender’s beauty is unreal. Mock takes a serious view of this,

Femininity in general, is seen as frivolous. People often say feminine people are doing ‘the most,’ meaning that to don a dress, heels, lipstick, and big hair is artifice, fake, and a distraction. But I knew even as a teenager, that my femininity was more than just adornments; they were extensions of *me*, enabling me to express myself and my identity (Mock 2014, 147).

She allowed her friend Wendi to do her eyebrows, to apply silver eye-shadow on her eyes as it was “natural-looking” (Mock 2014, 113). Mock discusses how her body, clothes and make-up were “on purpose” (Mock 2014, 147) because she was certain about herself. Make-up becomes an expression of her real identity. Although because of her feminine curves, beauty and sex-surgery, Mock is considered to have a privileged position over other trans women, she addresses this issue, “We must recognize that we all have different experiences of oppression and privilege, and I recognize that my ability to blend as cis is one conditional privilege that does not negate the fact that I experience the world as a trans woman” (Mock 2014, 237).

Trans people and violence

Mock’s asking for “embody(ing) realness, rather than performing and competing realness” does not blur her vision of the violence suffered by trans people and especially by trans women (Mock 2014, 116). “The violence that trans women face at the hands of heterosexual cis men can go unchecked and uncharted because society blames trans women for the brutality they face. Similar arguments around rape, the argument goes that (by revealing herself) ‘she brought it upon herself’ (Mock 2014, 161). While “passing” does provides an ability to have a job, house and safety from verbal and physical violence, from “hatred, outrage, panic or disgust” (Stryker 2008, 6) but it also demands an erasure of one’s real identity, a disavowal of one’s own self. “Passing” creates an alternative identity and trans individual remains a divided self to maintain his/her esteem in the eyes of other people of his/her alternative identity. However this established identity is unreal and it does more harm than good and results in labels like deceiving, deceitful, dishonest when real identity gets exposed. So Mock encourages trans people to be real because is “a path to survival,” an awakening to one’s truer self (Mock 2014, 161). We must move beyond bodies and value talent:

The work begins by each of us recognizing that cis people are not more valuable or legitimate and that trans people who blend as cis are not more valuable or legitimate. We must recognize, discuss, and dismantle this hierarchy that polices bodies and values certain ones over others” (Mock 2014, 237)¹⁰.

Flesh bodies will certainly cease to interest and occupy the minds of people and will also cease to act as a source of torture for those who do not fit in the given bodily form or exhibit accompanying gender if our sole recognition is our creative faculties and our calibre to do the undaunting tasks for the benefit of the whole humanity and not only for the divided world of man, woman and outcasts. We must aspire for a true, valuable and talented self, ready to explore the horizons and aim to soar “higher still and higher” (Shelley 1820, line 6).

Conclusion

Trans individuals when pass as cisgender are often dubbed as dishonest and deceitful. Cisgender’s gender performance is counted as real while trans’ is unreal. Hence heteronormativity is a façade. By socially programming individuals to behave and act in certain manner, and suppressing or eliminating any elements of subversion, heterosexuality is able to continue its hypocrisy. Trans persons are most obvious victims of this hypocrisy. They face physical and verbal violence once the protective shield of ‘passing’ gets holed with the surfacing of their real identity. Mock through her “personal and universal” (Bianco 2014) story urges us to see beyond the limits of heterosexuality. Our existence is not simply a matter of fitting in the male/female, masculine/feminine binary, but a matter of an expression of inner personality, of our inner self, of who we really are. In our myopic vision of upholding the hypocritical social and cultural codes of behaviour, we are robbing trans individuals of their opportunities to live freely and flourish as fuller human beings. In order to make a harmonious progress, we need to break the shackles of age old psychological conditioning to read a person in terms of body, gender and clothing. Instead of gendering individuals, we should aspire to create a gender-free society, a society that will read and value an individual for his/her capabilities, potential and his/her contribution to the upliftment of the society.

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Notes

¹ I have used the word ‘feeling’ here to denote masculinity and femininity gender roles. Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing and submissive (Tyson 2006:85). As this paper is about transgender people, so the word ‘feeling’ makes it easy to explain the difference between body’s sex and emotional experiences.

² A term in Psychology, Gender dysphoria (formerly gender identity disorder) is defined by strong, persistent feelings of identification with the opposite gender and discomfort with one’s own assigned sex that results in significant distress or impairment. People with gender dysphoria desire to live as members of the opposite sex and often dress and use mannerisms associated with the other gender. For instance, a person identified as a boy may feel and act like a girl. This incongruence causes significant distress, and this distress is not limited to a desire to simply be of the other gender, but may include a desire to be of an alternative gender. However WHO is actively working towards declassifying transgender identity as a mental disorder, a change prompted by recent studies on the mental and physical health problems faced by trans people like stress, anxiety, depression, murders and suicides.

³ Chromosomes are the carriers of the genes or units of heredity. There are two types—autosomes and sex chromosomes. Sex is set, or “determined,” when an X chromosome from an egg finds itself in a nucleus with an X or a Y from a sperm. XX=female: XY=male. Phenotype expresses the characters of individuals like form, sex, colour and behaviour etc. Phenotype can be read out from individuals by direct observation. Hence in the case of trans individuals, phenotypical observation is not a reliable source for his sexual alignment which once again indicates that a person’s physical self (gender identity) and his feelings (sexual orientation) are not natural but wired into our brains by societal laws and norms.

⁴ An incomplete and incomprehensive representation of gender identity and sexual orientation. Transgender individuals are those who identify with a gender that differs from their assigned sex. This is a facet of identity that is completely distinct from sexual orientation. These graphs do not represent the full spectrum of either facet, as they are multidimensional. For instance, there may be genders that some identify with that are neither “male” nor “female. Furthermore, there are no “lines” that divide these identities, and they may be considered malleable and overlapping.

⁵ Janet Mock is an American writer, TV host, transgender rights activist, contributing editor for Marie Claire, and former staff editor of People magazine’s website. Her book *Redefining Realness* is New York Times bestseller.

⁶ To date, there exist only a select number of memoirs written by self-identified Black trans men and women. In 1995, Ru Paul served us with his memoir, *Letting It All Hang Out* and over a decade later, in 2010, he published *Workin’ It: Ru Paul’s Guide to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Style*. In the same year that Ru Paul publishes *Workin’ It*, Miss J. Alexander—the former infamous runway coach of Tyra Banks’s America’s Next Top Model—published *Follow the Model: Miss J’s Guide to Unleashing Presence, Poise, and Power*. BY David B. Green Jr. on March 7, 2014 <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/03/redefining-realness-janet-mock-book-review-2/>

⁷ “Mock quotes Black feminist heroines Audre Lorde and Barbara Smith in her introduction, and Zora Neale Hurston’s words in the epigraph appearing before Chapter 1, strongly suggesting that *Redefining Realness* is a continuation of the critical conversations on womanhood already begun by Black woman, though mostly by cisgender writers. Thus, Mock’s book might be best placed within a genealogy of Black women writers and the subgenre of trans memoir.” Writing Herstory and Resisting Invisibility: A Review of Janet Mock’s *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More*. By

[Darnell L. Moore](http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/03/a-review-of-janet-mocks-redefining-realness/) on March 21, 2014 <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/03/a-review-of-janet-mocks-redefining-realness/>

⁸ Mock's love for dress as a child has been an issue of debate. Smash reviewed it as an assertion of essentialism feminists fight against. Essentialism maintains that certain characteristics are inherent in us like choice of clothing and colour. We choose to wear dress or suit according to our gender. Long hair and dresses are a girl's naturally inherent trait. However it can be argued that Mock in her act of wearing dress does not reinforce the cultural construct of gender but projects her inner self, self she feels comfortable with. This incident is a step towards her real self-revelation. Smash's review of *Redefining Realness* is available at <https://liberationcollective.wordpress.com/2014/04/17/redefining-realness-by-janet-mock-a-book-review/?blogsub=confirming#subscribe-blog>

⁹ As Mock decides to confess her transsexuality to her boyfriend, Aaron, she utters these words, page 11. She dedicates the book to Aaron, "For Aaron, who loved me because of myself, held me accountable to my truth, and became home."

¹⁰ Here Mock echoes Femme theorist Minnie Bruce Pratt's thoughts that we must recognize and accept that "every aspect of a person's gender expression and sex will not be consistently either masculine or feminine; man or women." Pratt, M. *S/he*. New York: New York University Press, 1996. p. 21.