

Teaching Transgender Issues through Documentary and Southern Comfort

By Heather McIntosh, Communication Department, Boston College

In January 2010, President Barack Obama appointed Amanda Simpson, a transwoman, as Senior Technical Adviser to the Department of Commerce. Several states have laws that prohibit types of gender discrimination, including Minnesota, California, and more recently Massachusetts. Advocacy group Make the Road New York organized a protest of clothing retailer J. Crew in March 2010 about its practices of not hiring transgender individuals (“Transgender Need Not”). Transgender issues appear as part of college-level courses, and sometimes those issues become the subject of entire courses, such as Transgender History, Identity, and Politics at the University of Oregon (see Reis). Susan Stryker’s *Transgender History* outlines these issues and their tensions as they arose throughout the last century, while memoirs such as Jennifer Finney Boylan’s *She’s Not There: A Life in Two Genders* and Jamison Green’s *Becoming a Visible Man* offer individual experiences and perspectives on being transgender in U.S. society.

Outside books, mainstream media continue to represent transgender individuals, with some representations still relying on long-held stereotypes and others bringing forward the issues of lived experiences, such as *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999) and *TransAmerica* (2005). Documentaries in particular represent a range of transgender experiences. *Paris Is Burning*, Jennie Livingston’s 1990 documentary, focuses on the Harlem drag balls in the 1980s. Tami Gold’s 1992 *Juggling Gender* explores the life of Jennifer Miller, a circus performer who appears female but wears a full beard (see Straayer). Some documentaries about transgender issues address the subject through

aspects of performers and performance, such as these two as well as Venus of Mars (2003), which connect to some of the popular cinematic representations such as *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001). In the fiction films, the comedic spectacle of these performances potentially renders the transgender individuals as “others.” But for many documentaries, the overall goal becomes to represent transgender people as not “others,” but as human, as people. Kate Davis’s 2001 documentary *Southern Comfort* tells the story of Robert Eads, a transman who was living in rural Georgia and dying of ovarian cancer. The documentary follows Eads and his family during the last year of his life, exploring his past, his relationships, and his health problems. With a two-person crew and small camcorders, Davis captured highly personal moments and exchanges in an understated, simple visual style that consisted primarily of on-location shooting and interviews. This style allows for a more intimate kind of documentary that offers an alternative to the over-the-top representations of transgender individuals. It also serves as an effective documentary for teaching transgender issues, as many of the issues it raises still affect the community even today.

In this essay I explore the teaching of transgender issues through documentary with *Southern Comfort*. I begin with addressing the political act of defining some key terms fundamental to these issues. I continue with a very brief consideration of some transgender stereotypes and suggest the possibilities of documentaries as a corrective to these stereotypes. I then discuss the background of *Southern Comfort*, its production, and its reception to provide a foundation for some of the themes that emerge within the documentary. These themes include family, acceptance, medical establishment

dealings and attitudes, and identity boundaries. In the end, I bring this documentary and its discussion into questions of pedagogy, including teacher positionality, classroom environment, syllabus placement, assigned readings, and classroom strategies.

Key Terms

Defining labels provides a starting point for discussing transgender issues, but it must be remembered that this act is political, power-laden, and overall just plain messy. As Wentling, Schilt, Windsow, and Lucal explain in "Teaching Transgender," "Any discussion that attempts to define the terms beneath the transgender umbrella should first offer the caveat that putting labels on and creating boundaries around identities is a politicized practice that can be a difficult, awkward and exclusionary process" (50). Binary oppositions of male and female, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual, and sex and gender quickly become blurred. Further terms such as "cisgender," "hir," "sie," "ze," and "genderqueer" attempt to shift away from these binaries (Beemyn "Transgender Terminology"). For students facing these issues for the first time, however, defining some key ideas helps provide a foundation on which to build. Some of the terms outlined here are used interchangeably, but they should not be.

"Sex" refers to biological sex, the sex assigned at birth, such as male or female (Stryker 7, Wood 20). "Gender" refers to the social and individual construction of masculinity and femininity, which are not tethered to the sexual assignment of male and female respectively (Stryker 11, Wood 21). Often, particularly in the popular press, the

word “gender” gets used interchangeably with the word “sex,” thus obscuring the power implications of each term’s construction and their conflation (Stryker 11). “Transsexual” individuals feel the bodies they are born into fail to match their identity (Stryker 18, Breemyn “Terminology”), and some will undergo “gender reassignment surgery” and hormone treatments in order to align their bodies with their identities (Breemyn “Terminology”). “FTM” individuals, or “transmen,” were assigned female at birth but identify as male, while “MTF” individuals, or “transwomen,” were assigned male at birth but identify as female (Breemyn “Terminology”). (Some individuals reject all four of these terms, however.) The term “transgender” serves as an overarching term for transsexuals, transwomen, transmen, transvestites, drag, cross-dressing, and other forms of “gender expression” (Reis 166; also Breemyn “Terminology,” Ekins and King 18, and Stryker 19). In her book *Transgender History*, Stryker uses the term “transgender” “to refer to the widest imaginable range of gender-variant practices and identities,” noting that its definition changes depending on historical, cultural, and other contexts (19). Throughout this essay, I use the term “transgender” in this way.

Transgender Stereotypes

Many students’ ideas about transgender identities originate in the mainstream representations of transgender individuals. Most mainstream fiction representations exaggerate the extremes of personality in service to the storylines and spectacles of entertainment. The unknown gender identity of transgender characters in television procedural dramas such as *CSI* and *Law and Order: SVU*, for example, become part of

the puzzle the forensic scientists and police detectives must solve in various episodes. Cinematic representations span both comedy and horror. In comedy films transgender characters inform the humor, such as in *Myra Breckinridge* or *Desperate Living* (Kraus "Transsexuality"). In some of these films, transgender characters become part of "camp" or even "fetish," and not necessarily in transgressive ways (see Robbins and Myrick). In horror and suspense films transgender characters become killers, sometimes because they are denied gender reassignment surgery, such as in *Silence of the Lambs* and *Dressed to Kill* (Kraus "Transsexuality"). Other dramatic films offer more measured representations, but in the end many of the transgender characters end up killed, such as in *Boys Don't Cry*.

The documentary form offers the potential to represent corrective alternatives to these stereotypes. Documentaries begin with the real world, not fictional stories, for their representations, and they attempt to engage audiences in more ways than just entertainment, such as through educating on issues, raising of awareness, or calling for action. Instead of primarily aiming for humor or spectacle, documentaries are situated within "discourses of sobriety" alongside science, education, and politics (Nichols 3). According to documentary theorist Bill Nichols, "Discourses of sobriety are sobering because they regard their relation to the real as direct, immediate, transparent. Through them power exerts itself" (4). While the sciences can privilege that "direct" relation, documentaries can make no such claim, but that connection to reality still affords them a greater cultural weight than fiction-based texts.

But a documentary does more than just "show" us a reality. It also makes some kind of argument, or point, about that reality. As Spence and Navarro explain in *Crafting*

Truth, “The form they [documentary makers] choose, the way they assemble their argument, far from being neutral or innocent, entails choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications” (114). Documentary makers build that argument through the different conventions they use, such as interviews, on-location shooting, archival materials, re-enactments, voiceovers, and others. Despite popular conceptions that documentaries achieve a degree of objectivity, that conception is a false one. In making any argument, a documentary comes from a particular point of view. Some documentaries make that point of view explicit, while others attempt to hide that viewpoint within the conventions that point more toward this perceived objectivity, such as a voiceover narration, archival materials, and some interviews. While some critics reject the ideas of a documentary reality (see Trinh), the construction of reality as an argument provides a useful starting point in unpacking the deeper meanings within a documentary. It also is the key idea to remember in teaching *Southern Comfort* or any other documentary.

Production Background

Documentaries offer an opportunity to show lived experience in ways that move beyond the spectacle and entertainment-driven values of mainstream fiction-based programming. Documentaries, particularly more independent ones made from outside the mainstream, bring forward voices usually relegated to the margins (Straayer 208), and they can do so without pushing them back into those margins. With *Southern Comfort*, “[V]iewers experience the loss of a proud, wise, eloquent, and highly original

human being” (Allen 39) in Robert Eads. The roots of the documentary began with a short segment within A&E television’s documentary titled *The Transgender Revolution*. Eads appeared in a couple segments of that documentary, but director Kate Davis saw a deeper story in Eads than just those parts. Born female, Eads married and had two sons before making the change to his chosen identity. He opted for the “top” surgery (a double mastectomy) but not the “bottom” surgery (a hysterectomy), and he took testosterone for several years as well. He lived as a man, had several relationships, and cultivated a chosen family. Eads even drew an invitation to join a group affiliated with the Ku Klux Klan. Overall, though, he lived a simple life in a trailer in the Deep South. According to Allen, Eads “had never been a political activist” and “tended to live his life in private” (38), thought the making of *Southern Comfort* offered him the opportunity to make a political statement.

Eads avoided going to a gynecologist for more than a decade, and ultimately he was diagnosed with cervical and ovarian cancer. At the time of the documentary’s making, he was dying from it, but he still managed to note, “It’s kind of a cruel joke that the last only part of me that was really female is killing me.” He had attempted to seek medical care, but multiple doctors and hospitals refused to treat him. In making the documentary, Eads wanted his story told, hoping “he could make a contribution in his last days” (Allen 38). With the two-person team, Davis was able to capture the closeness of Eads with the people in his life, sometimes living with him in his trailer and helping with his medical care when needed. As *Advocate* reviewer Jan Stuart notes, “One is amazed at the level of intimacy that filmmaker Davis is able to achieve [...], as her subjects make out in hotel rooms, administer hormone injections, and debate the

nature of intimacy” (“Family”). Davis captures Eads’ relationship with Lola Cola, his lover in his last years; Maxwell Anderson, his best friend; and even with Eads’ son and beloved grandson, among others. Davis also follows Eads on his journey to Southern Comfort, an annual conference for transgender people held in Atlanta, Georgia, each year since 1991.

Davis committed to making the documentary about Eads without funding. Southern Comfort went on to be featured at the Sundance Film Festival, where it received the Grand Jury Prize in Documentary, and to be shown at the Hot Docs conference in Toronto, where it won the Audience Award. The documentary also won acclaim in receiving about 20 different awards. It aired on HBO during April 2002 and was released on DVD through Docurama. Eads’ story as told through this documentary resonated with audiences and created him, and his life, as a human story.

Key Themes

Several key themes emerge in a close viewing of Southern Comfort. The first theme relates to the importance and complexities of family, both biological and chosen. The second theme of acceptance follows closely from the first, which involves acceptance by others. Attitudes toward the medical establishment become the third theme. The final theme involves the blurry lines of different identities. While I set these themes up as different sections, they are not discrete categories. In many cases they overlap, connect, and blur.

Family, both biological and chosen, becomes a central issue in Southern

Comfort. The documentary introduces us to Robert's chosen family first. Maxwell, whom Eads has known for ten years, is a brother to him. Eads describes their relationship: "It's kind of almost a father-son relationship. Maxwell has become one of my children. I've taken him as a responsibility of raising him." Other members of Robert's chosen family include his partner Lola Cola, Cas and Stephanie, and Cori, Maxwell's girlfriend. With the exception of Stephanie, all of them are transgender. This chosen family extends further to the attendees of the Southern Comfort conference, wherein transgender people gather for community and support, and Robert's final speech there honors them and includes them in his family as well.

Eads also connects to his biological family. He grew up as Barbara, and a couple sequences show a young Eads clothed in dresses and fancy shoes. Eads jokingly calls these his "cross-dressing days." Also as Barbara, Eads married a man and had two children with him, Doug and Bo. The biological family line continues with Keegan, his young grandson. His parents remain part of his life, though not without periods of estrangement.

Types of acceptance follow closely from these different families, as some members accept Eads and others struggle with it. Eads certainly finds acceptance among his chosen family, which Davis shows well through their warm-hearted interactions among one another and through their expressions of support and concern for Eads. Support from his biological family, however, manifests some of the difficulties some people have with understanding transgender experiences. One person offering acceptance is Bo, Eads' younger son. Though Bo struggles a bit with the identity labels, once switching between "he" and "she" in one sentence, he does accept his mother's

transition, particularly when he states, “Had I gotten married, I would have chosen Mom to be the best man at my wedding.” Even though Eads identifies as male, Bo still refers to him as “mom.” A source of unconditional acceptance that Eads enjoys comes from his grandson Keegan. Eads explains, “I am, have been, and always will be his Pawpaw. Pure and simple. And that’s -- I just am.”

Eads’ parents offer a more complicated set of reactions to their struggles with accepting Eads’ transition and identity. Eads’ mother originally accepted him as part of the gay community, but the news of his being a transsexual, according to Eads, brought on “tears. There was the usual, ‘Where did I go wrong? What did I do to make you this way?’” and it also brought on an estrangement for almost five years. Eads’ mother never speaks on camera in this piece -- we only hear about her reaction through Eads himself.

Eads’ father refuses to appear on camera, but he does offer his thoughts through voiceover. He struggles with reconciling the identity of Robert with Barbara. He discusses introducing Robert as his nephew and telling people that Barbara is estranged from him. He further explains his disappointment: “I had dreams my daughter would grow up and marry the man who would be president of the United States [...] I knew my daughter was that kind of a woman. And those dreams, as you well know, were shattered. But I will say this: I am very proud because I know that in him today beats the heart of my daughter Barbara.” Instead of seeing Robert as himself, his father sees Robert with Barbara still inside.

Acceptance also can come from outside immediate family and the transgender community. Early in the piece, Eads heads to the grocery store and talks about driving

through what he calls “Bubbaland,” home of the “good old boys.” He relates one instance in meeting one of those boys while smoking his ever-present pipe outside of Wal-mart. As the two sat and smoked, the other man invited Eads to join his group, which turned out to be an offshoot of the Ku Klux Klan. Robert laughs while telling this story, noting, “If people give you half a chance, they accept you without realizing it.” The acceptance in this sequence is based on Robert’s ability to pass as one of those “good old boys.”

These differing levels and types of acceptance provide a complicated theme throughout the documentary, but integrating acceptance and family complicates it further. For Robert, family provides the bedrock, the foundation, which makes losing family the hardest “because family is the core, family is the stone. It’s what holds everything together and all of a sudden -- it’s gone.” His statement follows a common issue with coming out. When individuals announce their identities, many of them find the liberation of becoming part of a group and gaining an identity, but at the same time, they might lose the only core support group they ever had with their families. As *Southern Comfort* shows with Eads’ father’s statements and his mother’s reaction, not all families embrace these changes.

The medical establishment, including doctors and hospitals, becomes a prominent theme throughout *Southern Comfort*. For some in the transgender community, the medical establishment offers a key step in their transition processes through the different surgeries. For Robert, the transition involved a double mastectomy and hormones, but not a hysterectomy due to a doctor’s advice. Eads explains, “Being a man or a woman has nothing to do with your genitalia. It has to do with what’s right here

in your heart and what's in your mind." He also notes how some people seek the complete transformation, however.

But the transgender community represented in this documentary feels that the medical establishment treats them unfairly. One of the first discussions in the documentary centers on bad surgeries and even poorer aftercare that those seeking changes have experienced. Cas's surgery ran about \$4,000, and the lacking aftercare resulted in a hole in his chest, through which muscle could be seen. Eads points out how those receiving a mastectomy for breast cancer sometimes receive careful incisions with minimal scarring, but that same level of care fails to appear in cases of transgender surgeries. Several mentions throughout the documentary point to the surgeries' prohibitive costs, as well.

Other discussions point to the medical establishment's failure at caring for the transgender community. Maxwell mentions how the medical establishment refuses to understand what transgender individuals experience and refuses to support them in their processes of transitioning. He states, "They refuse to make us complete." In their refusal, they also fail to make changes look more real, and not so fake. He continues, "And I think they do it on purpose."

The more dangerous and damaging claim about the medical establishment lies in its refusal to treat Eads' cancer. Robert's friend Debbie talks about calling 20 doctors and multiple hospitals in seeking treatment for him, but once she tells them he is transgender, all of them turn her down. Eads discusses how the doctors turned him down, too. According to him, some doctors were honest and said, "I'm sorry, but it would be too much of an embarrassment to my other patients." Also according to him,

another doctor said, “Oh, I’m sorry, but we’re not taking any new patients right now.” Eads sums up their responses to their motivations with, “To them, I’m expendable.” While Eads did delay going to the doctor for several years, the documentary makes clear that proper medical treatment might have improved the quality of his final years and maybe even extended them a bit.

The final theme comes from drawing and blurring identity category lines, particularly ones of sexual identity and sexual orientation. These comments come primarily from the interviewees themselves in discussing how they see themselves then and now. Cori, Maxwell’s girlfriend, for example, used to identify as a gay man. Lola talks about John, whom she still identifies with for business reasons. She says, “In some ways John is very much me, but in a lot of ways he’s like a construct.” Eads complicates this labeling further, when he talks about being pregnant and how that messed him up a bit: “The only time I ever felt like a homosexual was when I was married to their biological father because I now and always have been a heterosexual male. I like women, always have. I’ve never felt like a lesbian. I was just a man in love with women.” Further discussions about intimacy complicate this theme further. Cori and Maxwell, for example, talk about their intimacy, describing its emotional fullness without the physical penetration. Of all the themes that emerge in the documentary, these uses of labels prove the most confounding and will provide the most challenge in terms of class discussion.

Pedagogy Questions

Teaching transgender issues in general, and through documentary in particular, raises some key pedagogical questions, including teacher positionality, classroom environment, syllabus placement, assigned readings, and classroom strategies. Teacher positionality serves as the most important pedagogical question to consider when teaching transgender issues, documentary, and Southern Comfort. For me, teacher positionality first refers to my role as a teacher within the classroom space and my own viewpoints on the subjects at hand. Teachers' roles vary in their approaches and in their effects on the classroom. Facilitators lean toward the co-creation of knowledge, while Socratic techniques use questions toward the creation of knowledge and understanding. These two approaches invite students to participate in the discussions at hand. The authority model, however, positions the teacher as the expert within the classroom space, and it sets up knowledge as a one-way, one-sided conveyance. Overall, I prefer either the facilitator or questioner roles, but when discussing transgender issues and Southern Comfort, I have found that sometimes I end up as an authority offering background or clarification on some of the terminology and aspects associated with transgender experiences. Answering these questions is important to building discussion, but it is also important to prevent these questions from overtaking the entire discussion (Wentling, Schilt, Windsor, and Lucal 52).

Teacher positionality also refers to my personal attitudes towards the subject of transgender issues and Southern Comfort. It further refers to my decision of whether to disclose my attitudes. Sometimes, students sometimes try and guess the teacher's viewpoints, and other times, they project their or other opinions onto the teacher. Sharing personal views may prevent the guessing and projecting from happening, but

doing so also might derail a discussion as students may fear expressing a differing viewpoint or appearing “uneducated” to their peers. Some teachers feel comfortable sharing, while others prefer not to disclose. Ultimately, the decision remains up to the teacher, but reflecting on these matters beforehand helps with guiding the discussion and determining the teacher’s place within it.

Classroom environment becomes another important consideration in teaching issues that remain outside many students’ experiences and understandings. Ideally, classroom spaces should be set up as “safe” places for critical inquiry and general queries about transgender issues. Further, the spaces should be safe for students to share their own experiences, should they feel comfortable enough to disclose them. The boundaries for this safe space should be set up at the outset of each semester and maintained throughout the semester. While I do not want students to agree with every opinion brought forward, I do outline what constitutes respectful approaches to handling views they disagree with. I include these guidelines in both the syllabus and in class. Reis notes the importance of creating these expectations at the outset (167), and I suggest reinforcing them throughout a semester as needed.

Transgender issues can be integrated into a wide variety of courses related to gender and sexuality. In addition to Reis’ class on Transgender History, Identity, and Politics, Abbott writes about incorporating them in literature classes such as her course titled *Passing in American Literature*. Wentling, Schilt, Windsor, and Lucal list several topics within sociology and gender studies, noting gender binaries, gender performance, and social constructions of gender (50). I have taught transgender issues as part of classes on film theory and criticism, gender and communication, and women’s

documentary, with *Southern Comfort* becoming my primary text for that inquiry. Several authors writing about teaching transgender issues mention other documentaries such as *Toilet Training* (Wentling, Schilt, Windsor, and Lucal 53), while Abbott mentions *Just Call Me Kade* and *Venus Boyz*. For other titles, check out *Outcast Films* (www.outcast-films.com).

One advantage of *Southern Comfort* and other documentaries is that they provide a contrast to the popular representations students might already be familiar with, and this point might be useful when considering placement of this documentary in a course syllabus. I usually position *Southern Comfort* after a more mainstream text such as *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* to highlight this comparison. The camp of *The Adventures of Priscilla* (see Robbins and Myrick) brings the reality of Eads' story into sharp relief, and so the differences between the texts provide one accessible starting point for discussion. If the course focuses more on documentary, *Paris is Burning's* use on the performative mode (see Flynn) provides a more complicated starting point, but it still offers a distinct enough contrast to *Southern Comfort* in subject, style, and approach.

Choosing readings to accompany *Southern Comfort* still offers some challenges as few if any essays address transgender issues and this documentary specifically through a sustained inquiry. Though not from an academic journal, "Transpotting," written by E.J. Graff and published in *The American Prospect*, brings together transgender issues, *Southern Comfort*, and other related documentaries with questions that students might have about transgender identity, the transitioning process, and others. Graff offers her own observations about the documentary and about Eads that

could offer starting points for class discussion. For example, she writes, “Robert Eads, probably like much of his rural Georgia peer group, describes manhood and womanhood in sexist ways that make me grit my teeth -- and yet his idea of being a standard-issue heterosexual man is to get involved with Lola, who is newly transitioning from male to female” (37). This sentence alone raises questions about Eads’ representation and about Graff’s assumptions, and it might point to some attitudes held by students as well. For another example, Graff writes, “I’ve started to realize that transsexuals don’t conform to stereotyped ideas of how either sex should behave; rather, they give up a great deal—beginning but not ending with family acceptance, money, and bodily safety— to deviate drastically from what most people consider their ‘natural’ path” (39). This excerpt, too, raises some questions for discussion.

Some writing addresses Eads’ story and Davis’s production. Eads’ long-time friend Maxwell Anderson wrote “Remembering Robert” for *Transgender Tapestry*, a poignant tribute that addresses Eads’ life and the documentary. Anderson appeared in *Southern Comfort*, and interestingly, Anderson and others in *Southern Comfort* reacted poorly to their representations at first, but eventually they came to accept them (49). This short piece includes some background about the production, particularly more with the medical challenges Eads faced. Another article, also from *Transgender Tapestry*, delves into the production. Mariett Pathy Allen’s short piece, “The Making of ‘Southern Comfort,’” tells Allen’s first-person experiences with Davis and the documentary’s origins and production. It offers slightly more background on the production.

Here are some strategies for using *Southern Comfort* in classes. These suggestions are only starting points and can be modified easily.

1) Show the entire documentary during scheduled class time, if possible. Create an active viewing situation through providing students with some questions or prompts to guide them, such as themes briefly explored here, other related class texts, or other critical questions.

2) Before starting the class discussion, ask students to write a personal reflection on the documentary or to compose a discussion question. Once they complete these writings, ask them to share, if they are comfortable.

3) Divide the class into small groups, and assign each group a theme to discuss and then report back to the entire class. Ask them to find ways in which the documentary helps support the development of that theme. Another tactic here is to ask each group to brainstorm a discussion question.

4) Instead of the individual or small-group starts, begin with a full-class discussion. Start with asking them for questions they have about Southern Comfort, and encourage them to answer each other, if possible, instead of you answering for them.

5) Wind up the class with asking them to write a reflection on the documentary and the discussion.

6) Follow up the session with a discussion through a course management system, if available. Some students uncomfortable with speaking up in class may express themselves more fully in this forum.

Concluding Thoughts

Throughout this piece, I did gloss over some potential transgender issues to address.

One is passing, mentioned briefly in the discussion of Robert's "good old boy" story. Passing is a complicated issue associated with transgender studies (see Stone), and it is an idea developed more fully in documentaries such as *Paris Is Burning*. In *Southern Comfort*, though, it gives passing an affirmation of identity from a normative group, and I wanted to avoid offering that group further power. I also wanted to avoid possibly reinforcing a fixed, external point for identities, instead redirecting them back to the documentary subjects and the documentary's construction.

Another glossing point come back to the disconnect some transgender people feel between their identities and their bodies. The medical establishment labels this gender identity disorder, which creates a divide in the transgender communities. For some, the disorder provides affirmation, but for others, it creates a sense of resentment at being classified with a mental disorder (Stryker 13). This disorder also intersects with medical care and access to it, as the medical procedures related to it are not covered by health care plans (Stryker 14-15). Further, the situation creates a "double bind -- if the transgendered is not considered psychopathological, it should be delisted as a mental disorder; if it is to be considered psychopathological, its treatment should be covered as a legitimate healthcare need" (Stryker 15). A common issue in framing communities created around specific diseases is that sufferers might become "othered" through their symptoms, and thus become dehumanized into their symptoms. Addressing this possibility moves the discussions away from the documentary and into areas I prefer not to go in my classes.

A final idea is queer theory. In my discussion of the themes, I attributed identity definitions to the people interviewed in the documentary. Queer theories offer a

complicated and enlightening way of exploring the implications of transgender identity in *Southern Comfort*, but such a question warrants an extended inquiry in its own right. For a queer reading of identity in documentary, see Straayer's piece on *Juggling Gender* and *OUTLAW*.

In all, *Southern Comfort* tells a powerful story of Robert Eads' last year and the friends and family who supported him. It shows the power of acceptance and family, and it shows the complicated medical factors in transitioning and in getting general care. The intimate style, powerful story, and engaging subject all create an accessible documentary that only begins to touch on the issues that transgender people face, and it provides a useful starting point for classes in beginning their own inquiries into these matters.

Works Cited

Abbott, Traci B. "Teaching Transgender Literature at a Business College." *Race, Gender & Class* 16:1-2 (2009): 152-169.

Allen, Mariette Pathy. "The Making of 'Southern Comfort.'" *Transgender Tapestry* 103 (Fall 2003): 37-39.

Anderson, Maxwell. "Robert Allen Eads." *Transgender Tapestry* 103 (Fall 2003): 46-50.

Beemyn, Geeny. "Transgender Terminology." Available:

<http://www.umass.edu/stonewall/uploads/listWidget/8758/trans%20terms.pdf>.

Accessed 11 April 2011.

Boylan, Jennifer Finney. *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders*. New York: Broadway, 2003.

Davis, Kate. *Southern Comfort*. Perf. Robert Eads and Maxwell Anderson. DVD. Docurama, 2002.

Ekins, Richard, and Dave King. *The Transgender Phenomenon*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2006.

Flinn, Caryl. "Containing Fire: Performance in Paris Is Burning." In *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*, ed. Barry Keith Grant and Jeanette Sloniowski. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1998. 429-445.

Graff, E.J. "Transpotting." *The American Prospect* (27 August 2001): 35-39.

Green, Jamison. *Becoming a Visible Man*. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2004.

Kraus, Carolyn. "Transsexuality in Film." *GLBTQ Encyclopedia: Arts* (2002): 1-5. EBSCOhost, 4 July 2011.

Nichols, Bill. *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Bloomington

and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1991.

Reis, Elizabeth. "Teaching Transgender History, Identity, and Politics." *Radical History Review* 88 (Winter 2004): 166-177.

Robbins, Betty, and Roger Myrick. "The Function of the Fetish in The Rocky Horror Picture Show and Priscilla, Queen of the Desert." *Journal of Gender Studies* 9.3 (November 2000): 269-280.

Spence, Louise, and Vinicius Navarro. *Crafting Truth: Documentary Form and Meaning*. New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers UP, 2011.

Stone, Sandy. "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto." In *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle. New York and London: Routledge, 2006. 221-235.

Straayer, Chris. "Transgender Mirrors: Queering Sexual Difference." In *Between the Sheets, In the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary*, ed. Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs. Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1997. 207-223.

Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History*. Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008.

"Transgender Need not Apply at J. Crew." *Gothamist.com*. Available:

http://gothamist.com/2010/03/14/transgender_need_not_apply_at_jcrew.php.

Accessed: 12 January 2012.

Trinh, Minha-ha T. "The Totalizing Quest of Meaning." In *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov. New York: Routledge, 1993. 90-107.

Wentling, Tre, Kristen Schilt, Elroi J. Windsor, and Betsy Lucal. "Teaching Transgender." *Teaching Sociology* 36.1 (January 2008): 49-57.

Wood, Julia T. *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture*. 9th ed. Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2011.