

Tori Nash

Dr. Kwon

Gender & Literature 2140

14 December 2017

Janet Mock: Overcoming the Experience as the “Other”

Janet Mock is a prominent figure in a controversial, yet well-known group in American society: the trans\* community. This community in particular faces discrimination because they break a certain rule within American society: *people’s gender performance should match their apparent biological sex* (Ferree and Wade 72). However, this community continues to rise above the prejudice in order to appear as they truly are. In her book *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love, & So Much More*, Mock details her own personal journey of transcending the gender roles forced upon her as a child; while society tried to label her as a feminine boy, Mock states that she was a “transgender child who grew up to be a woman”; she was never a boy (Mock). In her memoir, she addresses the intersecting elements that made her into the person she is today: trans, low-class, black, and Native Hawaiian. This intersectionality placed her within the lower levels of privilege while simultaneously alienating her; essentially, she was cast as the “Other.” Her journey consists of gender policing and discrimination; nevertheless, she persisted in order to take the necessary steps to “align her body with her soul” (Mock). This paper explores Janet Mock’s compelling memoir and deep roots in intersectionality; by drawing on Ferree and Wade’s concept of gender, this intersectionality will display the complexities of Simone de Beauvoir’s notion of the “Other.”

In her book titled *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir defines the concept of the “Other”: “Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative of him;

she is not regarded as an autonomous being. . . She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other” (484). Throughout Mock’s childhood, she was expected to not only take on the role of a masculine boy, but to embrace it with zest and to celebrate the privilege that came along with it; however, she displayed extreme discomfort with masculinity, which made her incredibly masculine father uncomfortable. Mock states, “To my father, I was a sissy, and he tried his hardest to squash my femininity the only ways he knew how: intimidation and fear” (31). Later on, she acknowledges her father’s ability to see distinct differences between masculinity and femininity: “My father, though he didn’t have the words, couldn’t understand why I would *choose* to be feminine when masculinity was privileged. What I had to negotiate at a young age was embracing who I was while rejecting whom others thought I should be” (73). According to Beauvoir’s notion of the “Other,” men are allowed to exist without reference to anyone but themselves; likewise, throughout Mock’s childhood, she is defined in reference to men and masculinity. From the time boys are born, society teaches them that they are expected to take on the role as the “Absolute.” Regardless of this, her femininity threatened her societal label “boy,” therefore shifting her role into that of a less autonomous being. Essentially, her femininity pushed her into the position of the “Other.”

However, since Mock experienced life as a male, did she not experience some privilege, despite being a feminine male? Indeed, she did; men are always positioned over women simply because they can stand to represent themselves as people first, whereas women are forced to represent their gender first. Nevertheless, there are still societal factors that put Mock in a position of disadvantage. Mock fails to live up to the expectation of “hegemonic masculinity.” Men with hegemonic masculinity embody all justifications of gender inequality through the

positive masculine qualities that make up a “real man,” such as: “an athlete’s speed and strength, the CEO’s income, the politician’s power,” and, “the playboy’s virility” (Ferree and Wade 124). Clearly, Mock states that she was pressured to take on the role of a black boy; however, she was a black child without an interest in sports (which her father berated her for), living in a poor environment, and had an inclination towards society’s feminine aspects; ultimately, these are the factors that placed her incredibly low in the hierarchy of men. Due to colorism and hegemonic masculinity, Mock was placed above women, but not much higher at all. She remained the “Other.” Interestingly, this reveals that the notion of the “Absolute” can only exist within the hierarchy of men. The hierarchy of men is a common phenomenon within society in which men are judged for how well they embody hegemonic masculinity; essentially, this is a “rough ranking of men from most to least masculine, with the assumption that the more masculine the better” (125). Men are not the “Absolute” simply because they are men; they must prove themselves worthy of this title to each other. While men are permitted to exist without reference to women, their masculinity forces them to live in reference to other men. If this were not the case, Mock’s father would not have cared about her femininity simply because he labelled her as his son; however, he knew that in order to be considered worthy in the eyes of both men and women, Mock must embrace masculinity. She simply could do this because she was not a boy. As a result, she was cast as the “Other” by men.

As puberty approaches Mock, she realizes that she is reaching a crucial time period in which she “became aware of the medical steps that would be necessary to align my body with my soul” (Mock). As she grows older and begins taking female hormone pills; with this medical intervention, she is able to present herself more accurately and self-identify as a transwoman. However, this opened a new notion of the “Other” that Beauvoir did not consider. Because of the

binary gender system imposed by society, some people truly think that female-bodied people should only identify as a woman, whereas male-bodied people should only identify as a man. The binary gender system refuses to allow the trans\* community to have an appropriate space within the dating scene, particularly transgender women:

We, as a society, have not created a space for men to openly express their desire to be with a transwoman. Instead, we shame men who have this desire, from the boyfriends, cheaters and “chasers” to the “trade,” clients, and pornography admirers. We tell men to keep their attraction to transwomen secret, to limit it to the internet, frame it as a passing fetish or transaction. In effect, we’re telling trans women that they are only deserving of secret interaction with men, further demeaning and stigmatizing transwomen. (Stallings 208)

While all women are cast as the “Other,” cisgender women are raised in a society where this is considered the norm; although this norm can be singled out and criticized, it is something that is expected and realized. On the other hand, transwomen do not have the luxury of knowing what to expect while cast as the “Other.” By simply existing, they are breaking a significant rule in the gender binary system: *Men should have sex with women and women should have sex with men* (Ferree and Wade 23). This concept functions with the other gender binary rule that states that men and women should perform gender according to the biological sex; this is referred to as gender policing, which undervalues Mock as a woman and casts her even deeper into the notion of the “Other.” According to Beauvoir’s concept, women live only in reference to men; because of the lack of dating space for the transgender community, cisgender men feel as though they can only be with cisgender women; ultimately, this rejects transwomen, driving them further into the “Other.”

Because of societal expectations for men to be masculine and women to be feminine, transwomen demonstrate that they can surpass the gender binary limits that society attempts to restrict people to. However, by doing so, they are cast into a unique version of the “Other.” In Mock’s case, she was cast as the “Other” during her childhood for not being masculine enough, whereas she was cast yet again for being trans. Even though Janet Mock was cast as the “Other” due to intersectionality, she ultimately defied society in order to present the internal gender that speaks to her soul.

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