

RESEARCH TITLE

**Consuming Queer Identity: Commodification, Consumption,
and the Spectacle of Queer Experience in Chris Bohjalian's
*Trans-Sister Radio***

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Abstract

Chris Bohjalian's *Trans-Sister Radio* (2000) is a tale of a trans-woman navigating the gender transition process and its various ordeals on the personal and public fronts. Dana Stevens, the protagonist of the novel, transitions from being assigned as male at birth to a woman, socially and medically – with the help of medical technologies like hormone therapy and gender affirming surgery. The author uses the narrative device of radio broadcasting and by harnessing this specific narrative technique, this paper intends to emphasise the role of mass media in not just formulating the identities of queer people – but also their subsequent commodification and consumption. This role of technology as a means of communication and commercial manipulation, can also be felt in the twenty-first century, where social media algorithms shape the construction, articulation, and consumption of all things queer. Using the theoretical lens of “the spectacle” by Guy Debord, the paper highlights how public sphere becomes a domain for not just articulation of queer identity and experience and also an arena for its grotesque consumption as spectacle in not just *Trans-Sister Radio*, but also in the current neoliberal society dominated by scopophilia.

Key Words: Chris Bohjalian, *Trans-Sister Radio*, transgender literature, gender studies, consumption, cultural materialism, queer studies, Guy Debord, spectacle, mass culture.

استهلاك الهوية الكويرية: التشيي، والاستهلاك، وفرجة التجربة الكويرية في رواية Trans-Sister Radio لكريس بوهجاليان

المستخلص

تُعد رواية **Trans-Sister Radio** لكريس بوهجاليان (2000) حكايةً عن امرأة عابرة جندياً تخوض مسار التحول الجندي وما يصاحبه من محن متعددة على المستويين الشخصي والعام. وتنتقل دانا ستيفنز، بطلة الرواية، من كونها مُعينة ذكراً عند الولادة إلى امرأة اجتماعياً وطبياً، بمساعدة التقنيات الطبية مثل العلاج الهرموني وجراحة تأكيد النوع الاجتماعي. ويوظف الكاتب تقنية السرد عبر البث الإذاعي، ومن خلال استثمار هذه التقنية السردية تحديداً، تسعى هذه الورقة إلى إبراز دور وسائل الإعلام الجماهيرية، ليس فقط في تشكيل هويات الأشخاص الكويريين، بل أيضاً في ما يلحق بها من تسليع واستهلاك. ويمكن تلمس هذا الدور للتكنولوجيا، بوصفها وسيلةً للتواصل والتلاعب التجاري، في القرن الحادي والعشرين أيضاً، حيث تُسهم خوارزميات وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في تشكيل كل ما يتعلق بالكويرية والتعبير عنه واستهلاكه. وبالاستناد إلى المنظور النظري لمفهوم «الفرجة» عند غي ديبور، تبرز الورقة كيف يصبح المجال العام فضاءً لا للتعبير عن الهوية والتجربة الكويرية فحسب، بل أيضاً ساحةً لاستهلاكها بصورة فجة بوصفها فرجة، ليس في رواية **Trans-Sister Radio** وحدها، وإنما كذلك في المجتمع النيوليبرالي المعاصر الذي تهيمن عليه النزعة التلصصية البصرية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كريس بوهجاليان، رواية **Trans-Sister Radio**، أدب العابرين جندياً، دراسات النوع الاجتماعي، الاستهلاك، المادية الثقافية، الدراسات الكويرية، غي ديبور، الفرجة، الثقافة الجماهيرية.

I. Introduction

LINDA WERTHEIMER: Periodically this year we have explored what we've called the Nature of Love: those strange and wondrous ways we find our soul sparked by somebody else. This afternoon we continue that series with the first in a five-part story that begins with gender dysphoria—the clinical term for individuals who believe their sex at birth is in error—and ends with—

The opening lines of Chris Bohjalian's *Trans-Sister Radio* very emphatically draw the reader's attention to the peculiar narrative technique of the novel – “NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO TRANSCRIPT” as Bohjalian puts it in the very first page of the text (2). The novel opens not with Dana, not even with Carly, but with the NPR transcript – the voice of the institution precedes every human voice. Linda Wertheimer's opening lines establish the governing principle right at the outset. *Moreover, the opening sentence, interrupted right at the outset, also points towards the overarching interruption of the same narrative technique of fictional NPR (National Public Radio) transcripts with the use of alternating narrative first-person perspectives (Allison, Will, Carly, and Dana) to highlight the transition process of Dana in a heteronormative and media-saturated society, obsessed with the new and the exotic, and its consumption.*

“This week you will meet Will and Allison Banks, Carly's parents, as well as the fellow Allison met who she was sure, at first, would be the man of her dreams” (Bohjalian 2). This dialogue – referring to Dana as “the fellow” – by the other radio presenter crystallises the paper's central tension and is worth pausing on. The opening dialogues of the book do not mention Dana directly but present her as an object of fascination, meant to entice and titillate the listeners in order to retain them. They stage Dana's life for implied observers and listeners whose entertainment is prioritised over her transition and struggle. This paper takes that staging as its object of analysis and also understands that *Trans-Sister Radio* itself reproduces the logic of queer consumption it dramatizes – positing transgender identity as a spectacle available for cisgender consumption and interpretation. However, the paper does not intend to reduce the novel to a simplistic reduction, rather it identifies a formal tension that has gone largely unremarked in existing criticism on the chosen text.

As Marshal McLuhan declared in his famous phrase, the medium is paramount to the message it contains

it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology. (7)

Perhaps this novel's most prescient intervention involves the erosion of the public/private boundary through technological mediation. The narrative of *Trans-Sister Radio* peppered with transcribed radio interviews breaks open Dana's intimate journey of transition, transforming her into “Dana Stevens, the local teacher-transsexual”— a public figure whose private experience is subjected to collective scrutiny and interpretation (Bohjalian 363).

“Truthfully, I became an external woman because I have always been an internal woman. That's all there is to it. And I've known this most of my life” (Bohjalian 53). These lines by the protagonist, Dana Stevens highlight the central concern of the novel – which is Dana's decision to transition. However, this paper argues that despite the central concern being paramount, it is imperative to understand how masses consume queer identity and experience as spectacle. The paper specifically focuses on the novel's narrative technique which features

radio broadcasts and their transcripts to highlight the said issue of the media's power to circulate queer narratives in the public sphere to serve both sympathetic and non-sympathetic ends. Guy Debord opens *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) with a proclamation drawn from Marx: "All that was once directly lived has become mere representation." His argument is not that images are bad, but that under late capitalism lived experience has been systematically replaced by its representation, a vast accumulation of spectacles through which social relations are mediated (12). The spectacle does not show reality; it takes the place of reality, producing subjects who can only encounter the world through the screen of its image, sentiments echoed by Jean Baudrillard in his essay "Simulacra and Simulations" – "It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle" (172). The radio transcripts reify Debord's spectacle: they transform Dana's life, specifically her trans identity and her body, into a content/product, meant for mass consumption. Therefore, this paper uses close readings to trace how this spectacular logic operates across the novel's key moments and how it spills over even the intimate first-person sections that seem to resist it.

This paper utilises the Debord's concept of "spectacle" from his *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) as its primary theoretical lens which posits modern capitalist society as one governed not by direct experience but by its representation, i.e., the spectacle, which is the accumulated image of lived life, severed from authentic existence and reconstituted as commodity. For Debord, the spectacle is not merely a collection of images but has become a social relation among people mediated by images (and by extension – representation); one that transforms all genuine human activity into passive consumption. But what is more concerning is that the spectacle operates through the reason of separation and it fragments lived experience into easily consumable units, offering the illusion of participation while foreclosing genuine agency. Crucially, the spectacle marginalises difference, rendering it as othered, and thereby absorbing it into its own circuit of consumption. This dynamic is particularly salient for marginalized identities, whose authentic experience and struggle risk being reduced to a spectacle marketable and depoliticised. Applied to queer and transgender experience, Debord's framework invites us to ask: when queerness is rendered visible through narrative media like NPR in *Trans-Sister Radio*, does that visibility constitute authentic recognition, or does it function as a spectacular commodity where it is a curated image of the Other that satisfies the dominant culture's appetite for difference while leaving the structures that produce that marginalisation entirely intact?

II. *Trans-Sister Radio* – Author, Scholarly Conversation and Current Article's Intervention

Chris Bohjalian is an American novelist, playwright, and essayist of Armenian descent, whose oeuvre is notable for tackling a wide range of thematic concerns with nuance and complexity; he explores issues such as gender identity, medical ethics, trauma, and genocide, often placing ordinary protagonists in extraordinary circumstances. In focusing on *Trans-Sister Radio*, this paper places Bohjalian's work at the intersection of gender, technology, and identity – sketching how his treatment of a transgender protagonist both reflects and anticipates contemporary debates about consumption of queer subcultures. In doing so, the paper tries to demonstrate how the chosen text engages with the theoretical terrains of cultural consumption, queer lived experience, and the theory of spectacle. Scholarship on the text is limited yet meticulous; scholars like Ruthann Robson analyse how the work "reestablishes (sic) heterosexual normality" (59). Robson argues if Bohjalian's decision to pair Dana with a cisgender man actually brings about any structural change in the heteronormative design or not and argues that it becomes risky as "despite a small

substitution, nothing fundamental [is] altered” (59). Therefore, this paper aims to bring a new issue to light and that is of the commodification and consumption of queer identity and experience.

Trans-Sister Radio (2000) is a complex, heteroglossia-infused narrative that reveals the fluidity of gender, the instability of identity, and the ethics of representation and media intervention in contemporary American culture through the character of Dana Stevens, “professor for a film course at the university” (6). The novel recounts the transition of Dana, a transgender woman, and the ensuing repercussions of the same within her support network – her partner Allison Banks, Allison’s ex-husband Will, and their daughter Carly. Set in a small-town called Vermont, the novel’s narrative technique uses alternating narrative first-person perspectives (Allison, Will, Carly, and Dana) and fictional NPR (National Public Radio) transcripts to highlight her transition process in a heteronormative and media-saturated society. Through the use of this complex yet nuanced narrative structure, the novel touches upon themes of queer lived experience, gender transition, heteronormativity, and the role of public sphere in the context of transgender identity. The use of radio serves both as motif and a narrative device and by juxtaposing Dana’s interior lived experience with the radio broadcast medium, Bohjalian exposes how stories of gender and selfhood are constructed not within one’s mind and private life but also unravelled in the public sphere – as people discuss, speculate and ultimately, consume narratives of gender transition. One must remember Judith Butler’s dictum about gender’s public performativity – “exterior, surfaced, open to the perception of other” (Butler 521). This complex form composed of interspersed narrators not only resists a single authoritative telling of the story but also makes possible the liminal condition the novel seeks to emphasise – where identity, like the narrative, is entangled, fluid, and perpetually in process.

The representations of gender transformation in literary fiction can be traced back as far as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and the past few decades have witnessed a distinct flourishing of transgender literature. A domain largely defined by memoirs and found in the genres of science fiction and young adult fiction, it has now expanded to include a wave of fiction that approaches trans experience through more explicitly literary and experimental forms, often challenging genre boundaries (Haldeman). Alexa Alice Joubin in her essay titled “Performativity and Trans Literature” traces the genealogy of trans representation in literature through the lens of performativity, illustrating how language not only describes but also enacts gender. She identifies Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928) as an early example of such linguistic performativity, where narrative syntax and pronoun usage subtly destabilise gender categories. Joubin contrasts this with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, in which Iphis’s transformation dramatizes the overt, ritualistic power of language to effect bodily and social change. Together, Woolf and Ovid exemplify how trans literature has long relied on the performative potential of language to imagine and materialise transformations of identity (30). Yet where Joubin’s framework centres on the constitutive power of language within the literary text, the question this paper pursues is different: what happens when trans experience is not merely narrated but broadcast and when the literary text embeds within itself the apparatus of mass media and asks how that apparatus mediates, packages, and ultimately consumes the queer lives it purports to represent?

Bohjalian’s *Trans-Sister Radio* marks a significant development in trans literary fiction precisely because it turns this question into a formal problem, using the National Public Radio transcript as a structural device that places Dana Stevens’s transition inside the logic of what Guy Debord calls ‘the spectacle’ — a social relation among people mediated by images, in which lived experience is displaced by its representation (12). Where Woolf’s *Orlando*

undergoes transformation in the privacy of a narrative that seems to speak from inside gender's instability, Dana Stevens undergoes hers in public, on air, serialised across a broadcast week, consumed by an audience that will never meet her. The transcript form does not simply frame this consumption: it is the consumption, and reading it as such is the central task of the analysis that follows.

One may attempt to understand this in contrast with another trans literary work – *Middlesex* – a novel that establishes, with unusual clarity, what is at stake in the act of self-narration before asking what happens when that narration is no longer one's own to control. In both Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* and Chris Bohjalian's *Trans-Sister Radio*, bodily transformation is represented not merely as a material event but as a semiotic and social reconfiguration of what it means to exist as a gendered subject. Yet where *Middlesex* treats this transformation as an inward and largely private linguistic reorientation through Cal's renegotiation of selfhood conducted through memoir and retrospective narration addressed to a reader who arrives after the fact; *Trans-Sister Radio* radically externalises this process by submitting it to the mercy of broadcast media. In Bohjalian's novel, recognition is not simply a social or linguistic event: it is spectacular as per Guy Debord's definition. Dana's gender is not recognised in the quiet grammar of pronoun shifts or private disclosure; it is packaged, serialised, and transmitted to an audience of NPR listeners who consume it as part of a five-part series titled "The Nature of Love." Where Butler's framework asks how recognition produces the subject, Debord's asks who controls the apparatus of recognition and in whose interest that apparatus operates. *Trans-Sister Radio* insists that these questions cannot be separated: Dana's subjecthood is differentially produced not only through the social citation of gender (as Butler argues) but through the institutional and technological machinery of public radio, which determines the conditions under which her identity becomes legible, the narrative frame within which it is made palatable, and the audience to whom it is addressed. The novel thus does not simply extend the performative logic present in *Middlesex* into a more public arena; it interrogates what is lost, what in lived queer experience is necessarily flattened or consumed, when recognition passes through the spectacle.

III. "You'll Have to Wait Until Friday" – The Spectacle and its Consumption

As discussed above, the novel attempts to dismantle the essentialist understandings of gender by laying bare its performative construction through learned repetition, social and historical condition, and through a system of social reward and punishment. This can be understood using Judith Butler's gender performativity theory who treats gender as "an identity tenuously constituted in time through a stylized repetition of acts" (519), and explores how *Trans-Sister Radio* shows Dana's transformation as both a form of personal emancipation and a public performance to be acknowledged and accepted. However, in this process of displaying and telling Dana's story of her gender agency, Bohjalian inadvertently ends up othering her. Not only is Dana othered, but also commodified and her life story displayed for entertainment and consumption. Dana's self-identification as a woman and her consequent decision to transition challenge the illusion of gender sanctity as professed by the Western ethos, which is encapsulated by Butler as a product of regulatory norms which are "constrained by available historical conventions" and only offer an illusion of a choice (521). Her interactions with others, particularly the oscillating feelings of her girlfriend Allison, her husband Will, and their daughter Carly, reveal how gender is not merely an individual expression of bodily stylisation but a social negotiation enacted and re-enacted before an audience, if one wishes to have their gender recognised. It must be acknowledged that for gender enactment to be successful, Dana's gender has to be cited by others, an important observation which Butler also makes in her essay. But if we view this narrative through concept of 'the other' and Guy

Debord's lens of 'spectacle,' we come to understand how not just Dana but so many other queer experiences are fetishized in the postmodern cultural systems.

The inclusion of NPR transcripts even functions as a meta-commentary on the spectacle of consuming the lives of 'the other' in media, highlighting the palpable tension between empathy and sensationalism in the public consumption of transgender narratives, often found in contemporary TV dailies, soap operas and mass-produced films. The radio broadcast of their lives highlights how personal identity is a performance, shaped by not just language but also by technologies of representation, both old media – like TV and radio and in contemporary times through new media like social media platforms. The Opening NPR Transcript – depicts how Wertheimer and Adams's framing ("You'll have to wait until Friday") converts Dana's transition into a serialised commodity, and the "Nature of Love" series title depicts it as a spectacular category that makes queerness consumable by repackaging it as a universal love story – "the Nature of Love: those strange and wondrous ways we find our soul sparked by somebody else" (Bohjalian 2). The transition from one gender to another, a process of profound and intimate self-constitution, is repackaged as a narrative with cliff-hangers, a product structural to broadcast consumption. Dana's story is organised not by lived need but by the schedule of commodity consumption and finds its literal form in the Monday-to-Friday structure of the NPR series. Dana's surgery, the deepest moment of her bodily self-determination, become what is colloquially called a 'Friday payoff' in American slang.

Furthermore, Noah Adams's announcement that Carly's father is "the manager of one of our affiliate public radio stations" is loaded. It is offered as a biographical detail, but it functions as an institutional endorsement: this story comes from inside the broadcast family. The implication is one of trust, of credentialed narration. Debord's "integrated spectacle" describes a society in which the spectacle no longer presents itself as something separate from life but has merged with it, becoming indistinguishable from common sense, from journalism, from the apparently neutral voice of public radio. Debord says – "For the final sense of the integrated spectacle is this - that it has integrated itself into reality to the same extent as it was describing it, and that it was reconstructing it as it was describing it. As a result, this reality no longer confronts the integrated spectacle as something alien (9 *Comments*)." Here, NPR exemplifies this final integration: it presents Dana's queerness not as propaganda or entertainment but as news, as the natural object of sympathetic curiosity. This is the most sophisticated form of spectacular consumption – the one that most completely erases itself.

IV. "Authentic" Womanhood as Spectacular Commodity

The notion of the spectacle invades not only the radio transcripts but also Dana's own account of her transition, especially, in the moments she describes as liberation. The following two passages, in particular, enact the spectacle's deepest paradox: that the desire to escape the gaze reproduces the gaze's terms.

The first is the famous grocery store passage, delivered in the NPR transcript format, with Carly Banks narrating and Dana speaking in interview:

CARLY BANKS: For some transsexuals, and for Dana Stevens, that moment when they first 'pass' in public is almost an epiphany.

STEVENS: It was a Friday afternoon, and I emerged from a grocery store in Burlington with a big brown bag in each arm. Out of the blue, this very distinguished older man — a retired banker, I imagined — raced over to me and insisted on carrying both of my bags to my car. He even opened the front door for me, once I'd placed my groceries in the back! You could have knocked me down with a feather. No, I take that

back: You wouldn't have needed a feather. You could have knocked me down with a puff ball: a dandelion puff ball. Poof! And I would have been on my knees. (Bohjalian 92).

Carly frames this as an “epiphany,” a word with powerful spiritual connotations of revelation and grace, borrowed from the language of self-discovery. And Dana's euphoric retelling of it combined with the absurd comic overtones of the “dandelion puff ball” is deeply moving as an account of what it feels like to be perceived correctly for the first time. Yet employing a Debordian reading helps deconstruct how Dana's joy is triggered not by an internal experience of her own gender but by the recognition of it from outside, specifically, by a stranger's enactment of patriarchal chivalry. The “retired banker” who carries the groceries and opens the car door is performing conventional gender roles, and Dana's passing is confirmed by his willingness to perform them toward her. Her gender, that is, is verified by the spectacular economy of heterosexual appearance: she is a woman because a man treats her as one, because the image she projects elicits the conventional response.

This must not be confused as a critique of Dana's joy, which is genuine and duly earned. But it is a structural observation which shows the conditions under which recognition is available under spectacular society. Dana cannot simply be a woman; she must be a woman as seen. And the particular form of being seen is available to her in this scene only because she agrees to partake in a performative society fixated on viewing and hailing the subject into complicity. She is now visible to the system not because gender hierarchy has been overcome but because she now occupies an acceptable position within it. Debord writes that the spectacle “unites what is separate, but it unites it only in its separateness” (22). Dana's integration into gendered visibility is simultaneously an integration into a gender system that will later, when the community learns her history, turn against her with petitions and confrontations.

Similarly, Will Banks's section further highlights the problematic nature of relationship between Dana and other trans people who are turned into an object of speculation and Banks's position of the spectating subject. Will's narration comes across as a seemingly painful account of a heterosexual man whose life is disrupted by his ex-wife's relationship with Dana (Will is Carly's father and Allison's ex-husband) as people around him keep asking him about Dana and presenting him with pictures of stranger trans people. One of the novel's most revealing passages reveals Will's private relationship with the records by trans musicians and their cover art which Kate Michaels brings for him:

And Kate Michaels... kept finding me CDs in our collection by transsexual and drag performers. Every other day she must have discovered another one. Rarely—never, actually— did she find an artist we played on the air, but they were still talented musicians on reputable labels. I saw the word diva on the CD title a little too often for my taste, and to this day I don't understand why so many of them insisted on wearing feather boas, but there was usually nothing inherently wrong with their music. Any number of times I almost asked Kate to stop, or told her that the joke had gone far enough. Once I nearly suggested that her interest in this subject was unnatural, but I wasn't sure if the remark would come out as light as I meant it. (Bohjalian 128)

Will's act of staring at the CD covers highlights his consumption of trans identity through the medium of images, attempting to read their bodies for information; specifically, for evidence of happiness, by which he means whether passing is sustainable, whether the crossing is worth it, whether Dana's trajectory will end in something he can accept. His gaze is diagnostic, investigative, compelled and slightly ashamed (he even tosses the CDs onto “the stack on the credenza I never used”) (Bohjalian 129).

Debord argues that the spectacle constructs the subject as a passive consumer of images, someone who encounters social reality only through its representations. Will here is the perfect spectacular subject: he cannot talk to Dana about trans experience, cannot encounter it directly; instead, he stares at images of trans people on album covers, trying to extract meaning from surfaces like “trans-gender lips” and “transsexual mouths.” The adjectives appear as very telling. They are not simply lips and mouths; they are categorised, labelled, made into specimens. Will’s gaze disciplines what it sees, sorting it into the spectacular category of “the transsexual,” which he can then consume, interpret, and use to manage his anxiety. This is precisely the process Debord describes when he argues that the spectacle does not simply represent the world but organises it: it tells us what to see, and how. A similar idea can be found in Michel Foucault’s essay “Panopticism” – “But one finds in the programme of the Panopticon a similar concern with individualizing observation, with characterization and classification” (203).

On the other hand, Allison’s sections contain some of the novel’s most intimate and most unsettling accounts of the spectacular relation, because they take place within a loving relationship. The passage in which she describes Dana’s desire to learn how to perform femininity by watching and imitating Allison is central:

In return, all Dana wanted from me was to be a woman. To be womanly. He [sic] would watch me shave my legs and my underarms, he would stare as I pulled on panty hose or a bra. He would want to see how I sat when I talked on the phone with Carly, and to listen in when I chatted at night with Nancy or Molly or my mother in Philadelphia.

“How do you butter your toast?” he would ask, and he would be completely sincere...

“Let me watch you climb into your car,” he would say, and I would show him. “Brush your hair again, please.” “Would you flip through a newspaper?” “How do you pick up a pen?”

It was never annoying: I felt, simultaneously, like a cherished possession and a goddess.” (Bohjalian 138, 139)

This passage operates on two levels; on one level, it is a tenderly rendered account of trans longing as Dana studies the small, embodied performance of womanhood – all the gestures and postures that are learned rather than natural, that Allison performs without thinking and Dana yearns to acquire. There is something genuinely moving about the sincerity of the requests and questions: the toast, the pen, the newspaper. These are not spectacular gestures; they are the sub-perceptual choreography of daily life, the stuff below the image.

Yet at another level (which we cannot afford to overlook), Debord’s framework illuminates a disturbing feature of this scene. Allison is being transformed into an exhibit, a living tutorial, an image of womanhood for Dana’s consumption and emulation. She describes feeling “like a cherished possession and a goddess” — two figures that are both, in different registers, objects rather than subjects (139). A possession is owned; a goddess is worshipped, which is to say placed at a removing distance and adored as an image, as a representation albeit on a pedestal. Allison’s pleasure in this, one must remember, does not undo the fact that she has been conscripted into producing femininity as a spectacle, so that Dana may internalise and replay.

The important point here is not that Dana’s desire is wrong or that Allison’s pleasure is misplaced. But it is that the novel shows how even the most intimate and private sphere – the domestic, the erotic, the quietly quotidian – is shaped by spectacular logic. Femininity, under

the spectacle, has always been a performance produced for and evaluated by others; Debord's analysis of commodity culture as one in which appearance displaces being applies with particular force to gender, which has always demanded of women that they make themselves into images. Dana's desire to learn the gestures of womanhood from Allison reproduces this very spectacular constitution of femininity as something to be worn, performed, and seen rather than simply lived – "subjecting all reality to an appearance" (86).

V. Conclusion: The Novel's Complicity and Its Self-Awareness

The readings above suggest a sustained argument: that *Trans-Sister Radio* is not simply a novel about a trans woman's transition, but a novel about the conditions under which such a transition becomes representable, consumable, and legible within a spectacular society. The radio transcript form reifies this argument, making visible the institutional and cultural apparatus through which Dana's queer experience is mediated, packaged, and delivered to audiences who will encounter it as an image rather than a real person's life and situated experiences. Nonetheless, despite its empathetic portrayal of a transgender protagonist, *Trans-Sister Radio* is not without its own complications. As a cisgender male author writing from a trans woman's perspective, Bohjalian's position raises questions about narrative authority and the politics of who should get to represent whom and about the questions of self-representation. But one must heed to Roland Barthes' advice here – "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (147). The novel's explanatory tone at times betrays its didactic impulse to 'educate' its readers, revealing the limits of such early 2000s mainstream representations of transgender experience. Nonetheless, its complex and nuanced narration and insistence on the multiplicity of truth render it a valuable text for exploring how literature negotiates anxieties surrounding gender and sexuality at the turn of the millennium.

Yet there is a final, important metaliterary point to be discussed. Debord insists that the spectacle cannot be critiqued from outside, because there is no outside: "The spectacle is the bad dream of a modern society in chains, expressing nothing more than its wish for sleep" (18). Bohjalian's novel is itself a product of the spectacular economy it examines. Written by a cisgender man, published by a mainstream press, it delivers Dana's transition to a reading public in precisely the way the NPR series delivers it to a listening public – as a product of sympathetic liberal consumption. However, this is not a damning critique so much as an inherent characteristic of representation itself, one that Bohjalian seems to be aware of: why else embed the NPR transcripts so explicitly, why else make Carly the author and the broadcaster of her own family's story, why else give us Dana's first-person voice only to show it immediately captured by Carly's framing? The form of the novel seems to ask: what kind of representation of trans experience is possible within a society in which all experience has become representation? The answer the novel offers is not a solution but a discussion of this problem, one that needs to be discussed before it can be solved.

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