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# “100% DUDE”: STRAIGHTENING *DEGRASSI*’S ADAM TORRES

EVAN VIPOND

## INTRODUCTION: NORMALIZING TRANS

ADAM. So, I’m a guy, like 100% dude but I was born in a girl’s body. I’m an FTM female-to-male transgender. Questions? Anything, go ahead.

CLARE. Does that mean you’re gay?

ADAM. No, I like girls and since I’m a guy between the ears that makes me straight.

—“My Body is a Cage: Part One,” *Degrassi*



Adam Torres from *Degrassi*<sup>1</sup>

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EVAN VIPOND is a doctoral student at York University in the Department of Gender, Feminist and Women’s Studies. © 2016 Evan Vipond. All Rights Reserved.

When Adam Torres<sup>2</sup> (Jordan Todosey) arrives at Degrassi Community School at the start of grade ten, he seems to be like any other ‘normal’ teenaged boy: white, heterosexual, Christian, upper-middle-class and able-bodied. He does not disclose that he was assigned female at birth and raised as a girl. When Bianca, a classmate, discovers that Adam is a female-to-male (FTM) transgender boy,<sup>3</sup> she outs him to the rest of the school in a transphobic tirade, calling him a freak and ripping open his shirt to expose his bound breasts (“My Body is a Cage: Part One”). Suddenly, Adam does not align with the image of the ‘normal’ teenaged boy: he appears *slantwise*<sup>4</sup> in relation to the norms of youthful masculinity that he at first appeared to exemplify. In appearing slantwise, Adam might “reopen affective and relational virtualities” of gender and sexuality, destabilizing the sex=equals=gender binary (Foucault 138). However, following Adam’s formal coming out as transgender and subsequent navigation of the trials and tribulations of assuming a male identity, he is met with compassion and ultimately accepted by the majority of his classmates. By subscribing to the imperatives of what I refer to as transnormativity,<sup>5</sup> Adam achieves social acceptance but forecloses, in the process, on the subversion of gender and sexual norms and the proliferation of trans identities that he may have effected through a nonnormative gendered embodiment.

Over the past decade trans characters have become increasingly visible and normalized in mainstream North American media, which often focuses on medical narratives of transition. Trans representations in the media are often dichotomous, depicting trans persons who have already transitioned or are undergoing treatment—such as Adam—as sympathetic and thus worthy of acceptance, and trans or gender-nonconforming persons who fail to adhere to normative narratives of transition as “deviant” and therefore punishable (Vipond, “Resisting” 27).<sup>6</sup> Trans persons who are able or choose, out of necessity or fear of punishment, to adopt normative gender roles and sexualities ultimately reinforce this dichotomy, rendering those who are unable or choose not to conform to transnormativity even more precarious. Journalist and trans advocate Janet Mock, who wrote the critically acclaimed autobiography *Redefining Realness* (2014), shares, “I have been held up consistently as a token, as the ‘right’ kind of trans woman (educated, able-bodied, attractive, articulate, heteronormative). It promotes the delusion that because I ‘made it,’ that level of success is easily accessible to all young trans women [and

men]. Let's be clear: It is not" (xvii). Similarly, the recent media frenzy over Caitlyn Jenner—a white, affluent celebrity and an American Olympian, who has been heralded by mainstream media as the 'face' of the transgender movement—attests to this tokenism. Jenner is celebrated, as a transnormative figure, through her embodiment of whiteness, wealth, status, and Christian values.<sup>7</sup> By largely restricting visibility to 'successful' (read: transnormative) trans persons, such as Jenner, media representations gloss over the racial diversity and pluralities of genders and sexualities within the trans community, contributing to a narrow representation that does not reflect the majority of trans persons' experiences. This lack of diverse positive trans role models can leave nonnormative trans youth and trans youth of colour, in particular, feeling isolated (Taylor and Peter).<sup>8</sup>

In the Canadian teen television drama *Degrassi*,<sup>9</sup> the focus of my analysis here, Adam is normalized as the 'right' kind of trans person through medical discourses of transsexuality and transition, as well as through his adherence to social norms of masculinity, heterosexuality, progressive Christianity, affluence, and whiteness. While this affords Adam certain privileges and a sense of belonging within the plot of *Degrassi*, as a representation, it contributes to the further disenfranchisement of trans persons of colour, working-class or impoverished trans persons, and gender-nonconforming trans persons who remain underrepresented in popular culture and mainstream media.<sup>10</sup> Adam's white, transnormative body further contributes to the erasure of racialized queer and trans subjects who are not afforded the same privileges in the face of institutional racism, and focuses, instead, on the narrative of social progress and trans inclusion. While *Degrassi* has been acclaimed for its diverse representation of Canadian youth, the majority of recurring or main cast LGBT characters on the show have been white or of European descent.<sup>11</sup> This narrow representation of queer characters on *Degrassi* confines gender and sexual variance to the realm of whiteness while racialized characters are typically portrayed as straight and (always) cisgender. In a society where whiteness remains the status quo, trans 'issues' are only rendered legitimate when framed along the contours of a white bodies; bodies of colour are already marked as deviant.<sup>12</sup> In this way, whiteness acts as a straightening device, making Adam 'accessible' to mainstream audiences, who recognize him as a normalized (read: white) subject.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, medically transitioning entails high costs associated with counselling,

prescription medication (hormones) and surgical procedures, linking class and economic status to the medical achievement of transnormativity. The costs associated with medical treatment and physical transition are never mentioned on *Degrassi*, which allows viewers to take it for granted that Adam's upper-middle-class family can *afford* to support his transition. Adam's family's affluence de-centers the economics of transitioning faced by many trans people. For low-income trans persons and families, such as those who may be without a health care plan or benefits, hormones and surgery are unaffordable and thus unattainable.<sup>14</sup> Because Adam's affluence is taken for granted, the economic criteria that underwrite access to transition remain invisible, reinforcing the belief that trans persons can access gender confirming procedures and medication based on their desire to transition. As a white affluent trans subject, Adam upholds, rather than challenges, the status quo and the myth of transnormativity.

*Degrassi* explores Adam's gender identity and transition over three seasons until the character's sudden death due to a texting-while-driving accident in season thirteen. Through the deployment of Sara Ahmed's "straightening devices" (*Queer*), this paper focuses on discourses of heteronormative masculinity that normalize and straighten Adam's character. Over the course of three seasons, Adam's gender identity and transition are explored in conventional ways that seek to normalize Adam as a straight teenage boy who was "born in a girl's body" ("My Body is a Cage: Part One"). Adam's ultimate goal is to pass as a heterosexual, cis-gender young man. In pursuit of this goal, Adam distances himself from both gay men and lesbians, and ultimately aligns himself with heteronormative, white, middle-class 'family values.' Adam secures his future as heterosexual by subscribing to what J. Halberstam terms family or "reproductive time," in which one's futurity is made possible through proximity to heteronormative reproduction and inheritance (*Queer Time*). By the time Adam's narrative comes to an end following his death in season thirteen, he is a beloved character and fan favourite who epitomizes love and is accepted as a heterosexual teenage boy by his peers. In his death, Adam is ultimately normalized and straightened, foreclosing the possibility for a queer future or deviation from heteronormative family time.

## HETEROSEXUALITY, MASCULINITY AND STRAIGHTENING DEVICES

The naturalization of heterosexuality involves the presumption that there is a straight line that leads each sex toward the other sex, *and that 'this line of desire' is 'in line' with one's sex.* The alignment of sex with orientation goes as follows: being a man would mean desiring a woman, and being a woman would mean desiring a man.

—Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 70–71 (emphasis in original)

BECKY. Adam's a boy. I wouldn't have feelings for him if he weren't.

—“Building a Mystery: Part One,” *Degrassi*

Sara Ahmed's concept of “straightening devices” is particularly useful for examining and understanding the ways that trans persons realign with heteronormativity—a key component of transnormativity—through medical and social discourses of sexual orientation and gender identity (*Queer*). Components of both heteronormativity and transnormativity include traditional gender roles, passing, compulsory heterosexuality and sexual morality. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed offers a phenomenological theorization of “orientation” that allows us to critically examine the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality directs us towards certain “objects” (such as the other sex) while directing us away from others. “Bodies become straight,” Ahmed explains, “by ‘lining up’ with lines that are already given” (23). Those who do not, or cannot, line up appear slanted, or queer. Straightening devices work to reorient queer bodies along a straight path: “The heterosexual subject ‘lines up’ by being one sex (identification) and having the other (desire)” (97). Trans and gender-nonconforming persons appear slanted next to cisgender persons and must be reoriented towards the ‘opposite’ gender to align with the big-end system. Transnormativity entails compulsory heterosexuality, which acts as a straightening device, reorienting trans persons along the line of normative gender and sexuality so that they can be folded in to heteronormative society (Vipond, “Resisting” 25).

Fiona and Adam<sup>15</sup>

*Degrassi* juxtaposes Adam's trans identity with the (eventual) lesbianism of his first girlfriend, Fiona, exemplifying how pop cultural texts may deploy lesbian characters to distinguish transsexuality (gender identity) from homosexuality (sexual orientation) and, in the process, "save" trans men from deviance (Halberstam, *Female* 157). As Halberstam observes, distinctions between butch lesbians and FTMs like Adam contribute to heteronormativity "by consigning homosexuality to pathology and by linking transsexuality to a new form of heterosexuality" (*Female* 157). Putting it differently, the lesbian does not follow the straight path and appears more slanted than the heterosexual transsexual thus redeeming trans persons through heterosexuality. Adam initially diverts from the straight line and appears slanted when he binds his breasts with an ACE bandage, revealing his female body and highlighting how he has differed from the expected path: female equals girl equals desiring a man ("My Body is a Cage: Part One"). Fiona, who initially dates cisgender heterosexual men, distinguishes Adam—and, by extension, trans men—from lesbianism through her sexual desires. Adam's relationship with Fiona, who comes out as a lesbian shortly after dating him, establishes Adam as a straight man who is not interested in dating a queer woman. Much to Adam's chagrin, Fiona desires him for being "the best of both worlds," which alludes to an alternative path that destabilizes the gender binary and exceeds normative sexuality ("Chasing Pavements: Part Two"). Adam's body is queered, as being both boyish and girlish, through Fiona's gaze. However, Adam does not want Fiona to acknowledge any part of him that could be perceived as female (or intersex)

because to do so would be to threaten his gender and by extension his sexuality. If Adam is female, then he and Fiona are a lesbian couple; if Adam is between the sexes, then he is queer or deviant—in that he deviates from the gender binary. Adam's immediate foreclosure on this alternative—"No I'm not, Fiona. I'm a guy"—reorients Fiona in the process of reorienting himself ("Chasing Pavements: Part Two"). This illuminates the ways in which straightening devices work in tandem: straightening one line may mean reorienting another. Adam exclaims on his way out the door, "You don't want me. Face it Fiona, you want a girl" ("Chasing Pavements: Part Two"). By telling Fiona that she "wants a girl" and therefore cannot want him, Adam reinforces his straightness and masculinity by distancing himself from androgyny and, at the same time, reorients Fiona towards (queer) femininity. Fiona cannot desire androgyny because that would imply she desires Adam *as a trans man*, aligning him with homosexuality: "If homosexuals desire transsexuals they are announcing a preference for same-sexed (and concomitantly same-gendered) bodies" (Cromwell 516). Adam cannot desire a queer woman because to do so would undermine his gender identity and sexual orientation as a straight boy and situate him as an object of homosexual or queer desire. Jamison Green explains that trans men are "not supposed to want attention as transsexuals; we are supposed to want to fit in as 'normal' [straight] men" (501). Adam reorients Fiona's desire for androgyny towards women, distancing himself from female masculinity (such as the figure of the butch lesbian) and realigning himself with "normal"—that is, unmarked—masculinity. While Fiona is queered through her nonbinary sexual attraction, Adam is straightened through his desire to conform to heteronormative discourses of sexuality.<sup>16</sup>



Tristan<sup>16</sup>



Adam's juxtaposition with male homosexuality also reinforces the notion that transsexuality and homosexuality are mutually exclusive, realigning him with heterosexuality and further distinguishing his gender identity from his sexual orientation. When seen next to Tristan, a young effeminate gay boy from *Degrassi*, Adam appears as the more masculine of the two; Tristan's gay boyishness straightens Adam's trans boyishness. In the episode "Smash Into You: Part Two," Tori sets Adam up on a blind date with her friend. Unbeknownst to Adam, Tori reads him as a gay (cisgender) boy. When Tristan, who is stereotypically flamboyant, arrives for the date, Adam is shocked that he was misread as *gay* rather than *trans*. Adam explains, "I'm not gay" and "I like girls" ("Smash Into You: Part Two"). Tori asks bewilderingly, "But what about the rainbow pin on your bag?" to which Adam responds, "L-G-B-T. I'm the T part" ("Smash Into You: Part Two"). When Adam explains that he is "the T," it is clear that Tori assumed Adam is gay and *therefore cisgender*. This wrongful assessment normalizes the assumption that trans persons are heterosexual while gays and lesbians are cisgender. Occupying multiple identities, such as trans and homosexual, or occupying a space between identities, renders one unintelligibly queer within what Judith Butler formulates as the "heterosexual matrix," or, the "grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized" (208). As a counter to the rigidity of this "grid," Eve Sedgwick defines "queer" as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality, aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically" (7, emphasis in original)—a definition that suggests a more complex understanding of gender and sexuality beyond binaries and outside of the confined identities of the LGBT acronym. Adam forecloses the possibility of occupying a queer space, which would render him unintelligible, by delineating specific categories of identification: lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. Adam separates the T from the rest of the acronym, suggesting that because he is T, he is not L, G or B. Adam refers to the blind date debacle as an instance of "broken LGBT telephone," in which one must choose either a sexual identity (LGB) or a gender identity (T) ("Smash Into You: Part Two"). Cultural unintelligibility can, of course, have dire consequences, including exclusion from gender-segregated spaces, harassment, bullying and even death. Adam must reject a queer sexual or gender identity, allowing him to reorient himself as a

culturally intelligible straight boy, or risk the punishments that can—and often do—attend unintelligibility.

While Adam, as a trans person, is expected to fade into the background of gender normativity, he appears hyper-visible at other times, such as when using gender-segregated washrooms. Gayle Salamon observes, that for cisgender persons "[t]he primary anxiety today is not that transpeople will fail to pass, but that they will pass *too well*—that they will walk among us, but we will not be able to tell them apart from us" (192, emphasis in original). This anxiety is particularly evident in the public panic over trans-inclusive washrooms for fear that trans women, specifically, will "terrorize" cisgender women while using the washroom (cf. Cavanagh). Gender-segregated public washrooms, like clothing store changing rooms, are highly coded, gendered and policed territories, where any incongruence between gender and sex is intensified. Trans persons and gender-nonconforming persons (including butch women and effeminate men) are often scrutinized, harassed and even assaulted for being in the 'wrong' washroom, increasing the pressure to pass. Through the act of entering one door or the other, trans persons must "declare" their gender every time they use a gender-segregated washroom, whether they identify with that gender or not. Sheila Cavanagh notes that public washrooms make use of panoptic designs, which allow for the surveillance of gender: "The restroom gives people license to survey and inspect gender and genitals in ways that are disallowed in other public venues" (94). Patrons and security guards often police public bathrooms.<sup>18</sup> Confrontations in the washroom demand that trans persons 'prove' their sex, which is often assigned (or read) based on signifiers such as physical appearance, voice register, attire, behaviour and, most importantly, urinary stance: men must stand; women must sit. Trans persons who successfully pass are straightened, aligning with the gender binary, while those who are deemed gender suspect appear even more slanted.<sup>19</sup>

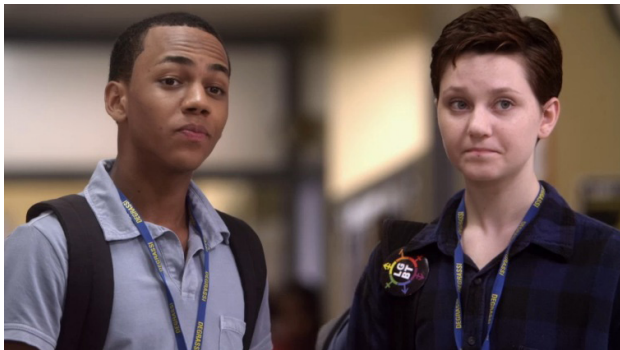
In the gendered space of the boys' washroom, Adam appears slantwise, or asymmetrical, when he flouts the codes of washroom conduct and fails to assume the "correct" urinary position of standing-to-pee. Cavanagh explains, "Cissexual laws of symmetry require masculine and feminine subjects to assume divergent urinary positions. How one stands or sits, hovers or squats, indicates gender" (25). In "Cry Me a River: Part One," Dave, a young black man and Adam's co-host to the Degrassi radio show "Mano-a-Mano", enters the boys' washroom. Adam follows behind Dave

and, as he washes his hands, watches Dave in the mirror, mimicking his urinal stance and posture. When Dave turns around, he finds Adam staring at his “junk.”<sup>20</sup> Unsettled, Dave tells Adam, “Dude, you’ve got issues,” and hurries out of the washroom (“Cry Me a River: Part One”). When Adam laments to Eli that “I only went into the guys’ bathroom because I wanted him to see me as a guy,” Eli suggests that Dave’s reaction was “because you got caught sneaking a peek,” which goes against the code of washroom conduct for heterosexual men (“Cry Me a River: Part One”). Homophobia and transphobia intertwine as Adam is simultaneously read in opposing ways: Dave is unconformable with Adam’s behaviour of “sneaking a peek,” which suggests a desire associated both with male homosexuality and with Adam’s sex-assigned-at-birth that does not correlate with his gender identity. Adam is performing conflicting signals of femaleness and male homosexuality. Assuring Eli that he was simply checking out Dave’s “stance at the urinals,” Adam pulls out a stand-to-pee (STP) device and tells Eli that this will allow him to use the urinal “just like” the other guys (“Cry Me a River: Part One”).<sup>21</sup> Adam’s desire to pass justifies his actions, which, although initially out of line with normative heterosexual maleness, are an attempt to realign Adam within the bigender system. The STP device emphasizes Adam’s desire to be male and allows him to assume the ‘appropriate,’ and culturally intelligible, urinary stance. Adam’s narrative of progress acts as a straightening device: he appears temporarily hyper-visible so that, in jumping through the hoops, he can ‘prove’ his ability (and commitment) to conform to heteromascularity and maleness, to become naturalized, unmarked, and thus unquestioned.<sup>22</sup>



Adam and Eli<sup>23</sup>

Adam’s normative embodiment of masculinity is naturalized and unmarked next to his friends, whose alternative masculinities become visible through their noncompliance with hegemonic masculine norms. Halberstam outlines the difficulties that trans men, who do not want to look like butch lesbians, face when negotiating masculinity: preppy clothing is encouraged while certain haircuts, such as punk styles or crew cuts, which are popular among butch lesbians, are to be avoided (*Female* 156). Adam wears loose button-up shirts that obscure the shape of his chest, as well as polo shirts, loose-fitting t-shirts and hoodies. He avoids codes of hyper-masculinity—such as sports apparel, military garb, leather, or baggy clothing—which could draw attention to his more feminine features or appear performative. Dean Spade explains that trans persons have “the requirement of being even more ‘normal’ than ‘normal people’ when it comes to gender presentation, and discouraging gender disruptive behavior” (“Mutilating”). Adam appears ‘normal’ next to his male friends, Eli and Dave: Eli wears goth clothing and guyliner—a colloquial term for eye liner that is worn by men—while Dave, who dresses like a jock, is short and insecure about his masculinity. Next to Eli, Adam appears ‘normal’ in his jeans and plaid shirts; next to Dave, Adam is normalized in his whiteness, demonstrating the ways in which minority masculinities prop-up dominant masculinities (Halberstam, *Female* 4). Adam’s ability to pass is facilitated by the deviations of those around him.



Dave and Adam<sup>24</sup>

Adam’s friends are predominantly straight and cisgender<sup>25</sup> as he rarely associates with other trans or queer people who may threaten his ability to pass as a heterosexual boy. Trans people often feel they are more

likely to pass individually as opposed to in groups. Stealth<sup>26</sup> trans persons may even avoid being seen with other trans or gender-nonconforming people for fear of being read as trans through association: if one person is read as trans the entire group may become suspect (Bornstein 63; Califia 217). Mock explains that, as a teenager, she wanted so badly to pass that “I began stealthily separating myself from the group” of trans girls she associated with “because the risk of being read as trans heightened” (156). While Adam mentions Degraasi’s LGBT club, we do not see him attend the group or interact with the other members and when he does interact with queer people it is to juxtapose his straight masculinity against their queerness. The only trans person Adam interacts with is celebrity Chaz Bono, who has ‘proven’ his heterosexuality and masculinity within the public realm and holds currency as a ‘successful’ FTM adult and thus does not pose a threat to Adam’s straight masculinity.<sup>27</sup> Bono’s appearance on the show, thus, serves as a glimpse towards Adam’s possible future as a trans man, offering Adam a brief moment of recognition (“Tonight, Tonight: Part Two”). Bono acts as a mirror reflecting Adam’s future as a fully-grown heterosexual trans man and provides Adam with hope for a happy ending—one of heterosexuality, partnership, longevity, wealth, and even celebrity—despite his queer past.<sup>28</sup> Though Adam has yet to undergo medical transition, if he remains on the “straight path” towards heterosexual adulthood, he too can have a happy ending (Ahmed, *Promise*).



Adam and Chaz Bono<sup>29</sup>

Adam's legibility as a heterosexual boy aligns him with what Ahmed refers to as "happiness scripts," which promise rewards—happy futures—in exchange for assimilating to the norms that facilitate social reproduction (*Promise*). In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed argues, then, that "[h]appiness scripts could be thought of as straightening devices, ways of aligning bodies with what is already lined up" (91). This alignment with "what is already lined up"—that is, the values and norms of heteronormative, patriarchal society—is what renders one culturally intelligible. According to Butler, "'persons' only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility" (22). When read together, these theorizations are particularly useful in understanding the ways that trans people can be straightened by aligning themselves with gendered scripts of happiness. "We can think of gendered scripts as 'happiness scripts,'" Ahmed explains, "providing a set of instructions for what women and men must do in order to be happy, whereby happiness is what follows being natural or good" (59). "Natural" and "good" are often associated not only with happiness but also with morality, where certain kinds of happiness are more valued. Morality can thus be used as a straightening device, encouraging those who might stray to stay on the straight and narrow path. Becky Baker, Adam's girlfriend in season twelve, is a conservative Baptist from Florida whose father is a pastor. When Becky first transfers to Degrassi, she is known as the ultra-conservative, Bible-thumping new girl who protests the school's production of *Romeo and Jules*, a gay adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Homosexuality does not align with Christian happiness scripts, which are organized around heteronormativity and the nuclear family. Becky develops a crush on Adam, initially reading him as a cisgender boy. When she is told that Adam is "trans," she does not understand what the term means: "He's transient? Like homeless?" ("Never Ever: Part Two"). Her intolerance becomes a sign of naivety and innocence, as she is completely unaware of transgender and transsexual people. Becky refuses to see Adam as a boy and reacts in a transphobic and homophobic panic: "What if I develop feelings for her? What if she turned me gay?" ("Scream: Part One"). "Turning" Becky gay would foreclose on her happy Christian future. Her best friend Jenna, who is also Christian but less conservative, assures Becky that "Adam is not gay" and that "he is transgender. That's different," suggesting a more inclusive gender script

that may allow for alternative paths to happiness (“Scream: Part One”). Becky’s homophobia and transphobia appear “out of line” with Jenna’s more accepting form of Christianity.



Becky and Adam<sup>30</sup>

Becky’s extreme conservatism thus appears slantwise next to Adam and Jenna’s progressive (LGBT-positive) Christianity. When Becky laments that she is being targeted for her (conservative) Christian beliefs, Adam tells Becky, “even I went to church as a kid,” explaining, “which is why I know not all Christians share the same beliefs as you do” (“Scream: Part One”). Progressive Christianity supports LGBT persons if they are able to subscribe to Christian morality and ‘family values’.<sup>31</sup> Christianity thus becomes an aspect of transnormativity and homonormativity precisely because, as depoliticized movements, they do not challenge hegemonic Christian views on gender, sexuality and morality, but actually support them. Becky begins to see and accept Adam as a boy and allows herself to develop feelings for him, justifying her feelings in an almost tautological way: “Adam’s a boy. I wouldn’t have feelings for him if he weren’t” (“Building a Mystery: Part One”). Ahmed elaborates, “Straightness gets attached to other values including decent, conventional, direct, and honest,” which extends Becky’s morality to Adam through her heterosexual attraction (*Queer* 70). Becky’s religious views provide her with a strong moral compass that acts as a straightening device for Adam. If she can ‘look past’ his biological sex and view him as a heterosexual boy, then it must be morally apprehensible to do so. Becky explains, “Adam is transgender. It means he was born a guy but he got the wrong parts” (“Building a Mystery: Part Two”). But when

Becky finds tampons in Adam's backpack, she is confronted with the incongruence between his gender and sex: "Boys don't get their periods" ("Building a Mystery: Part Two"). Not only does this perspective negate intersex bodies, but it also realigns menstruation with an essential gender (girl/woman). Becky rejects a shift in understanding that suggests gender and sex can exist in opposition and separate from one another, refusing the complexities elaborated by Mock, who writes that a "trans person can be straight, gay, bisexual, etc. . . . and a woman can have a penis and a man can have a vagina" (50). Here, Mock offers a variable and fluid model of gender, sex and sexuality, which acknowledges that some boys *can and do* get their periods.

Becky's feelings for Adam, as a heterosexual trans boy, straighten her within progressive Christian discourses of tolerance and acceptance. Becky is, at first, unable to separate gender from sex when she is confronted with the reality of Adam's anatomy. She views her desire for a female-bodied person as homosexual and thus immoral and agrees to attend reparative therapy at the request of her parents. When she returns she tells Adam, "It's not working, the therapy. It doesn't cure feelings. Sitting there everyday only reminds me that I like boys. And you're a boy, between the ears where it matters. And no therapy or prayer will change that" ("Tonight, Tonight: Part One"). Once Becky understands gender identity as separate from biological sex, she is able to view and accept Adam as a boy who was "born with the wrong body." Even though Becky does not accept homosexuality, which she views as a choice and thus immoral, she is able to accept Adam, who has been distanced from lesbianism and gay maleness, because he is a heterosexual boy with a correctable medical condition; their paths are (re)directed toward each other as 'appropriate' objects of desire. In adhering to heterosexuality, Adam and Becky are realigned with gender scripts that lead to happiness. This happiness is depicted in a clichéd heterosexual date montage: Becky and Adam are having fun goofing off in the mall, laughing as they try on silly hats and sunglasses; they order French fries and sodas, which Adam pays for, and the two laugh and giggle while throwing fries at each other. During this scene, Adam and Becky appear like any other happy young straight couple. Following normative gender scripts, Adam assumes the role of the man when he pays for lunch, fulfilling an act of chivalry that maintains Becky in the traditional female role. Ahmed argues that "[h]eterosexual love becomes about the possibility of a happy ending,



about what life is aimed toward, as being what gives life direction or purpose, or what drives a story” (*Promise* 90). This promise of happiness is what drives Becky towards Adam: “My parents want me to be happy. You make me happy” (“Building a Mystery: Part Two”). Even though her parents see Becky and Adam’s relationship as incompatible with her relationship with God, Becky follows the narrative of liberal Christian morality, which is based on love and acceptance. Both Adam and Becky are straightened along the path to future happiness.

In contrast, Becky’s parents appear slantwise and anachronistic, next to progressive and more accepting forms of Christianity—which allows for the folding in of LGBT persons who uphold middle-class ‘family values’—in their rigid stance against homosexuality and trans people (who they read as homosexuals). After Becky declares her love for Adam to her father, she maintains, “I have faith that if we show my parents how good we are together, someday they’ll come around” (“Tonight, Tonight: Part Two”). Becky is not living up to the happiness script that her parents expect of her—to find a male-bodied, heterosexual partner. However, Becky has faith in a happy ending because Adam is coded as a boy born with “the wrong parts;” she is following her life direction of heterosexual partnership. When Becky stands up to her father, proclaiming, “I love Adam,” before walking out on him, Becky walks the patriarchal line that directs her from father to husband—or, in this case, boyfriend (“Tonight, Tonight: Part Two”). Adam’s heterosexuality is contingent on upholding reproductive futurism and what Halberstam refers to as “family time” (*Queer Time* 152–53), which entails subscribing to heteronormative values such as marriage and childrearing. Family time will lead Adam to future happiness by realigning him with heteronormativity and white middle-class family values.<sup>32</sup> Adam is accepted as a straight boy who can be folded in to heteronormative society, thus participating in and reinforcing the notion of transnormativity as a white, straight, masculine and Christian boy.

## CONCLUSION: DEATH AND REDEMPTION

DREW. How do we move on? I mean, what do we do?

BECKY. I guess we make Adam’s death mean something.

—“Young Forever,” *Degrassi*

Adam, a beloved character who symbolizes love and acceptance, is normalized and straightened in his death, consequently foreclosing the

possibility for either a happy (heterosexual) ending or a queer future. Just before the start of his senior year, Adam is hospitalized due to a texting-while-driving accident and dies while undergoing emergency surgery.<sup>35</sup> During the episodes leading up to his death in season thirteen, Adam works at the Degrassi Summer Camp for young children while his girlfriend, Becky, works as a lifeguard in Florida for the summer—a distance that leads to jealousy, insecurity, and Becky’s request that the two take a break from their relationship. Desperate to regain their connection, Adam takes the camp van without permission in search of cellphone service and, while driving, receives a text from Becky. He begins to reply but before he can send his message he is alerted by sudden honking. Swerving to avoid a head-on collision, Adam drops his phone and crashes into a tree. In the final episodes of Adam’s life, transnormative imperatives of heterosexuality and family time are woven into the narrative of his death.

When Adam is in the intensive care unit at the hospital, unconscious and awaiting surgery, Audra corrects the doctor who misgenders Adam, explaining, “He’s my son. He’s transgender female-to-male,” and reveals that Adam has started estrogen-blockers: he has begun medically transitioning and is on his way to becoming physically male (“Honey”). Adam’s hormone therapy acts as a straightening device, as his transition now has an assumed medical trajectory: he has started estrogen-blockers, which will lead to testosterone, which will lead to chest reconstruction, which will lead to a male body. He will no longer be a threat to gender and sexual norms as he will visibly assume the role of heterosexual manhood and uphold the imperatives of family time. Before Adam crashes, he receives a text from Becky saying, “Adam, I’m sorry. We should talk” (“Cannonball”). The audience is hopeful that Adam will recover and be reunited with Becky to live happily, and heterosexually, ever after. However, Adam’s future path can never be actualized and, consequently, cannot be strayed from. Adam dies before he is able to fulfill the timeline of heteronormative manhood and family time: birth, marriage, reproduction and then death (Halberstam, *Queer Time 2*). Adam’s sex begins to align with his gender identity when he starts estrogen-blockers, but the next steps along the path are never actualized. Adam’s straightening is cut short—he does not reach heterosexual manhood—but is reaffirmed at the same time as he cannot deviate from his path. Adam’s future is posthumously imagined as straight, always on the horizon, but never fully complete. His death violently forecloses any future possibility of

deviating from the path of heteronormativity and, consequently, casts transnormativity as impossible.

Adam's death is particularly tragic when read through the figure of the child, as his 'growing up' is cut short. Firstly, Adam's intentions are seen as pure and innocent through his heterosexual, virginal (Christian) love for Becky. He does not have the experience—in life, in love or in driving—to make a responsible 'adult' decision. His actions are impulsive and stem from his passionate love for Becky, reminiscent of the young heroic lover Romeo, which clouds his judgment. Like the tragic lover, Adam dies, in part, because he loves too hard and lets his impulsivity get the better of him. Drew recalls of Adam after his death, "When you love something, or someone, you went after it. You didn't hesitate, which is why you made such a huge mark on the people around you" ("Young Forever"). Adam's life has meaning because of the positive impact he has on his family and friends. In a telling moment during Adam's memorial bonfire, Drew talks to his brother in spirit, telling him, "you'll always be right up here" as he points to his head, mirroring the way Adam points to his head when he explains, "Maybe on the outside I don't look like your typical guy, but up here I am" ("Young Forever"; "Purple Pills: Part Two"). Just as Adam's gender transcends his physical sex, asserting that gender identity is "between the ears," Adam's memory transcends his physical body to live on in his brother's mind *as a boy*. In his death, Adam is ultimately straightened once and for all in the memories of his family and loved ones. Adam is not remembered as a transsexual, but as a brother, son, and boyfriend.

Adam becomes a beacon for transnormativity, as a white, upper-middle-class, Christian, able-bodied, heterosexual, masculine young man, granting him access to and inclusion in the heteronormative, white middle-class. This greatly simplifies his narrative and forecloses the possibility of nonnormative trans embodiment. As trans theorist and scholar Jay Prosser explains, "The transsexual's capacity to narrativize the embodiment of his/her condition, *to tell a coherent story* of transsexual experience, is required by the doctors before their authorization of the subject's transition" (9, emphasis mine). Adam's story must be told as a coherent narrative so he can receive a diagnosis of gender dysphoria and be made accessible to the audience who may not be familiar with trans people. However, this eclipses the complexity of transitioning and trans experience that may not perfectly align with the transnormative

narrative. While Adam exemplifies the ‘universal’ (read: normative) trans person, his struggles are not representative of most trans people. “Not all trans people come of age in supportive middle- and upper-middle-class homes, where parents have resources and access to knowledgeable and affordable health care,” Mock informs us. “These best-case scenarios are not the reality for most trans people, regardless of age” (119). Adam is an example of the “best-case scenario” story, as he is white, Christian, able-bodied, heteronormative, has access to a good public school and belongs to an upper-middle-class family that supports him both financially and emotionally. However, nonnormative trans persons—namely those who are not white, middle-class, heterosexual and able-bodied—remain underrepresented. Trans representations, to be truly inclusive, must comprise a spectrum of identities and embodiments. Trans narratives must not be overly simplified but, rather, should embrace the complexities, slippages and contradictions of transitioning and living as trans in a bigender, hetero- and cisnormative society. Ultimately, to normalize trans is to define and regulate what it means to be ‘successfully’ trans, restricting access to those who, like Adam, can be folded in to white, heteronormative middle-class society, while rendering nonnormative trans persons invisible.

## NOTES

1. Season 10 promo for *Degrassi* on Much Music. Retrieved from: <[http://degrassi.wikia.com/wiki/File:We\\_love\\_you\\_and\\_will\\_always\\_miss\\_you\\_RIP\\_Adam\\_Torres.jpg](http://degrassi.wikia.com/wiki/File:We_love_you_and_will_always_miss_you_RIP_Adam_Torres.jpg)>.

2. Adam Torres was a series regular from 2010–2013.

3. I refer to Adam as a “transgender boy” as he has not undergone any medical procedures to change his sex. I use the term *trans* as an umbrella term including, but not limited to, transsexual, transgender, two-spirit, genderqueer, and gender-variant persons who do not fall within the sex-equals-gender binary. I use the term “transsexuality” to refer to a medical diagnosis, while transsexuals are persons who have undergone, or wish to undergo, SRS.

4. Michel Foucault refers to the “slantwise” position homosexuals occupy across the (horizontal) social fabric of heteronormativity (*Ethics* 138). Similarly, Sara Ahmed observes that the queer, who veers off of the “straight line” of heterosexuality, appears “slantwise” or “off-centre” (*Queer* 65).

5. I define transnormativity as “the normalization of trans bodies and identities through the adoption of cisgender [norms]” (“Resisting” 24). I argue, “To be transnormative, one must ascribe to the social categories white, middle-class, mentally and

physically able, heterosexual, and adhere to normative notions of gender (masculine man and feminine woman)” (23). For the purposes of this paper, I apply the term within the context of pop culture to Adam who fulfills the imperatives of trans-normativity as a white, middle-class, mentally and physically able, heterosexual, and gender-conforming trans person.

6. While I made this argument previously, in this paper I extend and further explore the sympathetic trans character, through Adam Torres, in greater specificity to complicate the cultural implications of this narrative of (conditional) acceptance.

7. Jenner is a Republican and has been hesitant to support same-sex marriage (cf. Nichols).

8. While there is limited information on the demographics of the trans population in Canada, according to the Trans Pulse project, which is based in Ontario, trans persons “belong to all ethno-racial groups, and 7% identity as Aboriginal” (Bauer and Scheim, 4). Furthermore, Egale’s climate survey on homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in Canadian schools notes, “Not only is it difficult to be LGBT in high school, but especially as a LGBT youth who is also a visible minority. The positive images and information out there for such a youth is very hard to come by” (Taylor and Peter).

9. *Degrassi* is the fourth incarnation of the Canadian teen drama series. *Degrassi* is based on the original series, *The Kids of Degrassi Street* (1979–1986), *Degrassi Junior High* (1987–1989) and *Degrassi High* (1989–1991). In 2001, the series was revived as *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (2001–present). The show was renamed to *Degrassi* in 2010 (cf. Byers).

10. Trans characters in mainstream film and television are predominantly portrayed by white actors. The following television shows feature white trans characters: *All My Children*, *Ally McBeal*, *Coronation Street*, *Degrassi*, *Friends*, *Hit and Miss*, *Nip/Tuck*, *The Fosters*, *The L Word*, *Transparent*, *Two and a Half Men* and *Ugly Betty*. The following films feature white trans characters: *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), *The World According to Garp* (1982), *Orlando* (1992), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), *Better Than Chocolate* (1999), *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999), *Dude, Where’s my Car?* (2000), *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), *Normal* (2003), *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005), *Transamerica* (2005), *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), *The Danish Girl* (2015), and *About Ray* (2015).

11. This is in reference to LGBT characters who have been part of the main cast or are recurring in multiple seasons. Since the series began in 2001, there have been two recurring queer characters of colour, Alex Nuñez (Deanna Casaluce) and Zane Park (Shannon Kook–Chun), although race is not explored in relation to their queerness. Ethnicity is deployed in the narratives of gay characters Marco Del Rossi (Adamo Ruggiero) and Riley Stravos (Argiris Karras), who are Italian and Greek, respectively, as a hurdle to coming out to their parents.

12. For more on racialized bodies as deviant, see Fanon and Yancy.

13. For an intersectional analysis of racism and transphobia, see Vipond, “Trans Rights.”

14. For an analysis of the costs associated with medically transitioning, see Vipond, "Trans Rights."

15. Photo from *Degrassi* season 10 episode 33 "When Love Takes Over: Part One" on Much Music. Retrieved from: <[http://degrassi.wikia.com/wiki/Adam-Fiona\\_Relationship](http://degrassi.wikia.com/wiki/Adam-Fiona_Relationship)>.

16. Fiona is eventually 'redeemed' when she comes out as a lesbian who is interested in cisgender women rather than trans men.

17. Season 11 promo for *Degrassi* on Much Music. Retrieved from: <<http://www.newnownext.com/the-encyclopedia-of-degrassi-gays/07/2015/>>.

18. Canada and most American states do not have laws governing the gender of washroom patrons (cf. Cavanagh). Over the last year, several anti-trans "bathroom bills"—which seek to consign trans persons to the washroom that aligns with their sex assigned *at birth*—have been introduced in the US and Canada (cf. Vipond, "Trans Rights").

19. For example, in the television show *The Fosters*, Cole, an FTM boy, is harassed while waiting in line to use the men's washroom. He is told he is not allowed to use the facilities because it is "confusing" for the younger students ("Things Unsaid").

20. Given Dave's blackness, Adam's behaviour of "sneaking a peek" at Dave's "junk," could also be read as participating in a historical fetishization of black men's penises (cf. Poulson-Bryant).

21. According to the DSM-IV, the "rejection of urination in a sitting position" is one of the diagnostic criteria for childhood gender identity disorder in female-assigned children.

22. "To be unmarked," Sally Robinson explains, "means to be invisible—not in the sense of 'hidden from history' but, rather, as the self-evident standard against which all differences are measured: hidden *by* history" (1, emphasis in original).

23. Season 11 promo for *Degrassi* on Much Music. Retrieved from: <<http://degrassi-blog.com/2011/06/24/degrassi-season-11-hq-promotional-pics-groups-couples/>>.

24. Photo from *Degrassi* on Much Music. Retrieved from: <[http://degrassi.wikia.com/wiki/File:Adam\\_dave.jpg](http://degrassi.wikia.com/wiki/File:Adam_dave.jpg)>.

25. Adam's first girlfriend, Fiona, does not come out as a lesbian until after they have broken up. Adam and Fiona are sociable post-breakup but do not remain close friends. Adam eventually become friends with, and a potential love-interest for, Imogen, who is bisexual, shortly before his death. Imogen is interested in Adam as a *boy* and thus their feelings for each other are deemed heterosexual.

26. The term *stealth* refers to trans persons who live as their chosen gender or sex and present as cisgender. Stealth trans persons typically adhere to normative gender presentation and roles and do not disclose that they trans (often for fear of prosecution).

27. Bono was the subject of a documentary, *Becoming Chaz* (2011), and authored a memoir of his transition (2011), both of which emphasize Bono's masculinity and identity as a heterosexual male.

28. In his memoir, Bono explains that while he initially came out as a lesbian, he "never felt completely at ease" within the gay community (3). He goes on to say,

“Without a doubt, as a child I thought of myself as a boy,” effectively straightening his queer past (4).

29. Photo from *Degrassi* season 12 episode 28 “Tonight, Tonight: Part Two” on Much Music. Retrieved from: <<http://www.newnownext.com/chaz-bono-and-jordan-todosey-talk-degrassis-trans-storyline/11/2012/>>.

30. Photo from *Degrassi* season 12 episode 28 “Tonight, Tonight: Part Two” on Much Music. Retrieved from: <[http://degrassi.wikia.com/wiki/File:Becky\\_And\\_Adam.jpg](http://degrassi.wikia.com/wiki/File:Becky_And_Adam.jpg)>.

31. For more on progressive Christianity and a list of LGBTQ-affirming denominations and churches, see <<http://www.gaychurch.org/>>.

32. While Becky and Adam would not be able to reproduce together, Becky is open to adoption: “So many kids need good homes” (“Building a Mystery: Part Two”).

33. Adam was killed off because the creative team wanted to address the consequences of texting-while-driving in an impactful way and Todosey’s contract had ended (cf. Swift).

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