# “The Trans Tipping Point”: Assessing Contemporary Transgender Visibility in Alternative and Mainstream Media

By

Emma Faron Konst

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Program in Cultural Studies and Critical Theory

in conformity with the requirements for the

Degree of Master of Arts

Queen’s University

Kingston, Ontario, Canada

Final (QSpace) June, 2018

**ABSTRACT**

This thesis seeks to develop a rubric for the assessment of recent transgender visibility across disparate media spaces. The rubric is based upon the critiques of transgender studies scholars and transgender activists on transgender representation in media. The rubric aims to address the most salient issues found in contemporary transgender representation and guide its user toward identifying more inclusive forms of transgender visibility that resist stereotypes. The rubric is both a resource for the analysis of transgender visibility as well as the production of media that focuses upon or includes transgender subjects.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This thesis is indebted to the transgender activists, artists and academics who have dedicated their lives to pushing for transgender representation, inclusion and power in various social, economic and political spheres. The research produced herein could not be possible without their efforts.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

# Introduction

Over the last few years there has been unprecedented visibility of transgender people in North American popular culture. In May of 2014, Laverne Cox became the first openly transgender woman to appear on the cover of Time Magazine accompanied with the article, "The Trans Tipping Point". In July of 2015, *I am Jazz*, a T.V. program about trans teen Jazz Jennings, premiered on TLC. In November, *The Danish Girl* (2015) which centers on the life story of Lile Elbe, one of the first known recipients of gender-reassignment surgery, premiered and would later be nominated for four Academy Awards. One month later, Vogue Magazine published the article, "Why 2015 was the Year of Trans Visibility".

Sadly, in the same time period, violence against transgender people has been recorded at its highest according to the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and The Advocate. In 2015 the HRC reported the murder of at least 21 transgender people in the U.S. alone. In November of 2016 The Advocate reported that at least 26 trans people had been murdered making 2016 the deadliest year of transgender violence on record in North America.

While academic inquiry has considered the commodified representations of Gay, Lesbian and Queer subjects within North American mainstream media at length (Bronski 1984, Clark 1993, Hennessy 1994, Chasin 2000, Pellegrini 2002, Tsai 2010), not enough attention has been payed to the specific representations of transgender people in this arena. According to the GLAAD Transgender Media Program, "most Americans learn about transgender people through the media. So when the media talks about transgender issues - it is imperative that they get it right". It is more pertinent now than ever that transgender representation in mainstream media is

critically examined to consider what role media visibility can and will take in empowering North America's transgender communities and educating the broader public to which they belong.

To that effect, my MA thesis seeks to develop a critical framework for assessing transgender visibility across a multitude of popular and alternative media channels. My criteria for developing this framework is informed by two primary sources: 1) academic literature on queer, and especially transgender visibility, and; 2) a sample of writing on visibility politics from transgender activists published and circulated through alternative media platforms. As activist Jacob Tobia writes, "visibility is a *strategy,* not an end goal. Visibility is a means to an end; it is a tool that we use to humanize trans people, but it doesn't automatically improve trans people's lives" (Dresden 2017). Drawing on both academic and activist inquiry into transgender visibility and representation in media, this critical framework will offer criteria to assess where, when and how transgender visibility empowers transgender people toward achieving social, political and economic liberation in North America.

The thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of the academic attention payed thus far to the intertwined subjects of queer and transgender visibility. Specific academic inquiry into transgender visibility politics has only begun to develop in earnest over the last fifteen years roughly. Academic inquiry into transgender visibility politics has considered trans visibility across multiple media avenues including mainstream film (Serano 2004, Rich 2013, Ford 2017), social media (Fink and Miller 2013, Singh and Meng 2014, Raun 2015, McInroy and Shelley 2015), and advertising (Tsai 2010). Yet, only a handful of theorists have taken on this work. Furthermore, even fewer academics have considered visibility as a

strategy of empowerment and liberation, opting instead to examine specific examples of trans visibility in mainstream or alternative media spaces.

The second chapter outlines the methodology which will guide the subsequent discussions of transgender representation. In this chapter, I put forth a rubric of four questions which seeks to tackle common representational mistakes or pitfalls frequent in the visibility of transgender people. My hope in putting forth this rubric is to demonstrate its efficacy as a tool for assessing the visibility of transgender people across disparate media spaces. The questions put forth in the rubric are directly informed by critiques made by transgender studies scholars as well as transgender activists and community leaders who have found fault with certain forms and methods of transgender representation in media. By summarizing the four most common critiques into a set of questions, I hope to develop a resource for those who seek to both assess various forms of visibility as well as a resource for those non-transgender cultural producers who wish to write or direct transgender characters and narratives.

Chapter three applies the rubric to three examples of trans representation in Hollywood films: *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013) and *The Danish Girl* (2015). Produced over more than a sixteen year span, these three films share a handful of important similarities. First, each film features a transgender character either as the film's leading role or as a central, supporting character. Second, in each respective representation, the transgender character is played by a cisgender actor. And lastly, each of these cisgender actors was either awarded or nominated for the highest accolade available to an actor for their portrayal of a transgender subject, the Academy Award. In this chapter, I apply the rubric designed in Chapter 2 to these

three films to assess the major themes present and orienting logics within each respective instance of transgender representation.

My critical analysis in chapter three is particularly informed by Hennessy's (1994) argument that since mainstream media operates within society as a "heterosexual economy of desire", the queer subject can only enter this arena as a commodity. While the representation of trans experience should have the potential to diversify this space, it does not, because trans stories are consistently scripted to conform to dominant neo-liberal narratives of social recognition, of passable femininity and heteronormativity. This practice inadvertently fetishizes, dehumanizes and "others" the trans characters depicted therein, denying and distorting the lived experiences of most trans people.

Conversely, chapter four applies the critical framework established in chapter two to three examples of trans representation in alternative media. *By Hook or By Crook* (2001), *Mosaic* (2014), and *Herstory* (2016) share a number of characteristics in common. First, each media text is made by a transgender director and writer or group of writers. Second, when transgender characters are featured in these texts, they are always played by transgender actors. Finally, none of these films were produced for or circulated within North America's mainstream film industry, though each has garnered attention and praise in its own right. Subsequently, these three media texts operate outside of mainstream media's "heterosexual economy of desire" and as such stand in (productive) tension with their Hollywood counterparts examined in chapter three.

While depictions of transgender people in Hollywood may ultimately work to appropriate the narratives of transgender subjects, transgender visibility made by and for members of the transgender community arguably represent a better source from which to glean an understanding

of the plurality of transgender identities that exist in North American society. As Ruby B. Rich has acknowledged, “when the baton passes from insider to outsider, the terms of cinematic enunciation change abruptly” (Rich 273). Critically, while trans visibility in mainstream media has received academic consideration (moderate though it may be), trans representation made by and for trans people in alternative media spaces has received even less attention from the academic community. This chapter subsequently endeavours to address that absence and bring well-deserved attention to the trans media makers of the moment.

As described in *Transgender Studies Quarterly*,

> "[w]hile there has been an emergence of cultural and aesthetic work by trans artists in the last quarter century, it would be naïve to cast this sudden international visibility in terms that are purely celebratory. Rather than simply lauding the amplitude and frequency of this production, we are compelled to ask what resistances and negotiations have made this amplitude possible and which continue to attempt to suppress or commodify it" (Carter et al. 472).

This quote describes much of the intended work of this thesis. As transgender people continue to become increasingly visible across disparate media spaces, this amplification must be met with equal critical attention. While visibility has doubtlessly served as an important catalyst for the empowerment of queer communities throughout history, it is also a primary site for the production and regulation of difference through representational processes such as tokenization and stereotyping. Put simply, no two instances of transgender visibility are made equal and so must be assessed in their own right in order to determine whether or not a moment of visibility is empowering or disenfranchising for transgender people.

As Julia Serano wrote in 2007, transgender media visibility "is informed by the different values our society assigns to femaleness and maleness" (Serano 47). Here, Serano specifically references transgender visibility made by non-transgender cultural producers. Films popular in the 1990s and early 2000s such as *The Crying Game* (1992), *Ace Venture: Pet Detective* (1994), and *Transamerica* (2005) have met with rebuffs from transgender studies scholars including Serano for their problematic depictions of transfeminine people. Writing in the wake of these films, Serano points to the commonality of "attempts to sensationalize and deride trans women" in mainstream media. Specifically, Serano argues that depictions of transgender people made by non-transgender artists often reflect heteronormative perspectives on gender. Subsequently, by examining transgender visibility made by non-transgender subjects, one may begin to discern the cultural assumptions which govern a culture's dominant conceptions of gender.

Media, particularly mainstream media, serves to inform and regulate a culture's shared, hegemonic imagination (Herman and Chomsky 1988). Many visibility and representation theorists have already begun to theorize and discuss the myriad ways in which media visibility functions as the stage upon which culture performs and regulates difference and normativity. In queer theory, researchers have posited that "the [celebratory] performance of visible differences" may serve as "the locus of political agency because of its potential to deconstruct foundational categories of identity such as race, gender, and desire" (Walker 868). Multiple queer communities have called for increased positive representation of queer subjects in mainstream media citing visibility as one of the best catalysts for political empowerment. However, it is elsewhere argued that "[r]epresentational politics—that is, the notion that political equality can be achieved by increasing the number of queer subjects represented in film and television—is by

now a clumsy lens through which to approach media texts" (Udy 2016). Despite this argument, diverse forms of transgender visibility continue to proliferate and come under contestation from disparate transgender communities. With multiple groups holding vested interest in the regulatory schema of media visibility, it is perhaps more important now than ever that we begin to develop criteria for the ways in which we discuss myriad forms of minority visibility and representation in media.

While completing this project, I was careful to keep in mind that, just as non-transgender directors have historically misrepresented transgender narratives, so too have non-transgender academics failed to adequately communicate transgender issues. As Vivian K. Namaste writes in the introduction to *Invisible Lives*, "by focusing exclusively on the *production* of transsexuality (whether through and examination of culture or the medical establishment), queer theory and mainstream sociology are blind to the erasure of transsexuality and transgenderism (Namaste 51). As an antidote to this common pitfall, Namaste, referencing Dorothy Smith, advises that

> "...we develop ways of knowing and ways of doing research that begin from the perspective of the lived experiences of the people under investigation. In such a framework, women and other marginalized groups are the subjects rather than the objects of knowledge. The goal of this research strategy is to allow particular subjects to speak about how they understand their situation. It is the task of the researcher to move from the standpoint of the subjects under investigation to a conceptual problematic that accounts for how people are related to their everyday worlds, through institutions and relations of ruling" (Namaste 46-47).

As a non-transgender researcher and writer, it is imperative that my project acknowledges its debt to transgender scholars and activists by keeping their voices central to the discussions which will unfold in the following chapters. My goal is to produce research which does not speak over the voices of the marginalized community whose politics are its principal concern. Instead, I hope this project will serve as one small contribution to the very broad dialogue that is transgender studies scholarship.

## Chapter 1: Literature Review

The thesis draws upon and will contribute to two primary fields of academic research: queer visibility politics and representation theory. As this chapter will illustrate, queer visibility politics and representation theory are two highly interrelated fields of thought. Indeed, in order to provide a fruitful discussion of recent transgender visibility, it is necessary that both areas of research be engaged. The first section of this chapter investigates the origins of queer visibility politics as a branch of queer theory which developed roughly in the early 1990's. This section also includes an overview of the debates and tensions that have emerged within the field concerning the political implications of visibility for queer subjects and the communities to which they belong. Thereafter, I will move to discuss the academic literature written on the specific topic of transgender visibility in mainstream media. The chapter moves in the third section to consider the politics of representation as described by canonical media studies theorist Stuart Hall. This section, moreover, considers the relationship between representation theory and queer visibility politics, reviewing the central tenets of the former which will inform the arguments developed in the subsequent methodology chapter of this thesis.

This thesis seeks to add to the work of those theorists who interrogate instances of queer visibility wherein transgender subjects are included as symbolic gestures of diversity, or worse, where transgender identity is misrepresented or outright derided. In particular, this thesis is informed by the work of researchers such as Erin J. Rand, Rosemary Hennessy and Wan Hsui S. Tsai, among many others, who have made evident the heteronormative logics of gender identity, performance and presentation in multiple examples of queer visibility as early as the 1990's. Due to the representational system of mainstream media "which is, by its very nature, shot through

with grids of exclusion, power and privilege" the most visible transgender subjects in popular culture are most often those who "encompass a narrow model of transgender subjectivity" which serves to "reaffirm highly normative understandings of gender, race and self-identity, and the relations of power which structure, and are structured by, these norms" (Lovelock 739). As transgender visibility continues to proliferate in North American culture, it is imperative that both activists and academics continue efforts to unpack how, when, where and why transgender people come to be represented in media in order to assess if that representation presents an accurate, fair and empowering depiction of transgender people and the communities to which they belong.

To that effect, this thesis seeks to provide a comprehensive rubric which will guide its user's consumption of transgender visibility across disparate media platforms. This rubric represents a unique contribution to the field that draws its evaluative criteria from the writing of both academics and activists concerned with emergent representations of transgender subjects in mainstream and alternative media. While many theorists have worked to unpack specific instances of trans representation, none so far have opted to provide an accessible methodology to inform, deepen and complicate audience's interpretations of transgender visibility more broadly. My hope in developing this rubric is that it will serve as a resource for those who wish to assess transgender visibility across diverse media as well as those non-transgender media-makers who wish to write, direct or produce in various capacities, subject matter related to transgender people, their communities and their issues.

**Queer Visibility Politics: Origins, Arguments and Trajectories**

Queer visibility politics originated in the wake of the tense political moment of the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980's. During this decade, as AIDS beset the North American population, gay men found themselves scapegoated by mainstream news outlets and members of the medical community (Wright 2013, McKay 2016). The earliest known report of the HIV/AIDS outbreak was published on June 5, 1981 by the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The disease, then referred to as Kaposi's Sarcoma and Opportunistic Infections (KSOI) was recorded in five gay male patients in Los Angeles (Hymes at al 1981). As the report was circulated across American news outlets, the CDC began to receive multiple reports of KSOI among gay males from doctors across the United States.

In 1982, reports began to emerge that appeared to link the origination of KSOI in the United States to one person, flight attendant Gaétan Dugas (McKay 2016). Dugas, referred to as Case O57 in an investigation by the CDC to test the validity of these reports, quickly became known as 'Patient 0' by CDC employees, a marker which was soon picked up by American news outlets who circulated the story of 'Patient 0' widely. As a recent article by Dr. Richard McKay describes, "'Zero' is a capacious word. It can mean nothing. But it can also mean the absolute beginning" (McKay 98). Crucially, less than a year later, in March of 1983, the CDC reported that most cases of AIDS were reported among "homosexual men with multiple sexual partners, injection drug users, Haitians, and hemophiliacs," effectively cementing an affiliation between gay men and the AIDS epidemic into the American public conscious. As described by Joe Wright, the American public "had quickly begun to assume that the men with 'It' were a distinct group cursed by their past behaviors, whose fates would not be shared by others" (Wright 1790).

This fact is perhaps best illustrated by what would become the widespread use of the term "gay cancer" to refer to the HIV/AIDS crisis (Wright 2013).

In the wake of the CDC 'Patient 0' study came a series of defamatory news reports which blamed the rampant spread of AIDS on the sexual behavior of gay American males. The consequences of such stigmatization for the gay community were unprecedented. As the decade progressed, the gay community was mired by increased violent harassment and insufficient medical attention as the death toll rose to the thousands (Rand 2013). At the same time, gay and lesbian activists began to employ "militant queer activism" in response to the AIDS crisis and concurrent, rising rates of anti-homosexual sentiment (Rand 2013). The loud, public and often angry activism of groups such as ACT UP forced some Americans "to face uncomfortable truths about the limits of the nation's tolerance and compassion" as well as their own prejudice (Rand 2013). By the end of the 1980's, gay, metropolitan communities had reached an unprecedented level of publicity, defamatory though it was.

Subsequently, the gay community entered the 1990's enmeshed in political turmoil (Rand 2013; 126). Public opinions polls demonstrated that while the majority of Americans acknowledged that the AIDS epidemic had ''set off a wave of anti-gay sentiment in the general public,'' (Yang 507) a majority of those polled also reported "having little or no sympathy for those who contracted HIV through homosexual activity" (Rand 126). It was at this time that a new kind of queer visibility emerged.

Throughout the 1990's, queer activism strategically and frequently utilized visibility-based protest tactics as a means of securing public platforms in order to advocate for queer rights. At the same time, lesbian and gay visibility in mainstream media reached unprecedented

heights. The concurrent developments in queer visibility activism and the emerging popularization of gay and lesbian subjectivities in mainstream media in the 1990's were the basis for the development of queer visibility politics as a branch of queer theory at the beginning of the decade. Indeed, the breadth of writing on queer visibility politics stems from these two areas of inquiry. However, since this thesis is concerned with queer visibility in media specifically, this chapter will focus upon the existing academic literature written on the visibility of queer subjects in media spaces and omit a discussion of queer visibility politics as it relates to queer activism.

At the helm of new queer visibility in media during the 1990's was the image of the 'lipstick lesbian', and the 'lesbian chic' phenomenon. Many queer visibility theorists have criticized the 'lesbian chic' phenomenon of the 1990's for it's decided fetishization and commodification of the lesbian subject (Chasin 2000, Caisullo 2001, Rand 2013, Nappier et al 2015). Erin J. Rand, among others, has critiqued the 'lesbian chic' phenomenon for producing a palatable, whitewashed depiction of queerness "divorced from politics, AIDS, and militant activism" that had hereto defined gay and lesbian struggles in the 1980's (Rand 126). By circulating images of conventionally attractive, mostly white, and largely apolitical lesbians, mainstream media produced a pink-washed vision of lesbianism which squarely catered to the heteronormative gaze. Images of lesbians within the branded perimeters of 'lesbian chic' ultimately had little in common with the politically active and racially diverse lesbian communities of the moment.

Queer visibility theorist Danae Clark responded to the lesbian chic phenomenon with the concern that inclusion of the 'lipstick lesbian' in both mainstream advertising and T.V., colluded in scripting a new, restrictive image of lesbian femininity (Clark 1993). As Danae argues,

"[g]iven the increasing affluence and visibility of one segment of the lesbian population - the predominantly white, predominantly childless, middle-class, educated lesbian with disposable income-it appears that advertisers are now interested in promoting 'lesbian window advertising'" (Clark 186). Clark additionally stipulated that advertisers had begun targeting gay male audiences who too fulfilled the privileged categories of the white, childless, middle class subject possessing disposable income. Such marketing tactics, she argued, illustrated the contemporary, cultural construction of gay and lesbian subjectivities under late capitalism.

In a similar vein of thought, Rosemary Hennessy (1994) contextualized new queer visibility within "a long history of class-regulated visibility" designed specifically to render labor and its conditions invisible to the bourgeoise eye. Hennessy draws upon the work of Grant Kester (1993) who argues that urban planning of the mid-19th century functioned to conceal the bourgeoise from "the trauma of seeing the laboring classes" (Hennessy 67). As Hennessy and Kester argue, this mode of perception in which "the differently valued divisions of labor that organize visibility" are wholly erased constituted a "phenomenological matrix" which would become characteristic of the bourgeoisie class (Hennessy 67). It is within this matrix that the new queer visibility of the 1990's culture that "the construction of a new 'homosexual/queer spectacle'" functioned to perpetuate "a class-specific perspective that keeps invisible the capitalist divisions of labor that organize sexuality and in particular lesbian, gay, queer lives" (Hennessy 66).

In sum, Hennessy argues that queer visibility of the 1990's elided both the queer labor necessary in enacting visibility as well as the structural conditions of heteronormativity which varyingly permit and prevent certain queer subjects from becoming visible. Although visibility

may disrupt the existing norm of heterosexual dominance, it does nothing to call out or disarticulate the power relations whereby it is always the queer minority group which must apply to the hetero majority for social and political recognition. As Hennessy concludes, a "radical sexual politics" capable of effectively disrupting heteronormativity "needs a way of explaining how the sexual identities we can see are systematically organized...as well as the ties that bind knowledge and power to commodity production, consumption, and exchange" (Hennessy 71). For Hennessy evidently, queer visibility in mainstream media represents a "limited victory" for queer subjects (Hennessy 32).

Both Hennessy and Clark bring attention to the regimes of power which organize who becomes visible in mainstream media according to hierarchies of social and cultural belonging and otherness. Additionally, each author explores how hierarchies of social and cultural belonging/otherness function in relation to capitalism, where capitalism regulates which bodies are desired (white, 'beautiful', wealthy) and which are rejected (racialized, 'ugly', disadvantaged) in and from the mainstream. As others have warned, when queer bodies are inculcated and made desirable in the mainstream via inclusion in advertising, commercial television, etc., there comes the risk that many (both within and outside of queer communities) will take inclusion in commodity culture as evidence of political, social and economic equality.

To that effect, queer theorist and civil rights activist Urvashi Vaid coined the term 'virtual equality' in 1995 to describe, in the words of her nephew, "a political moment in the United States where the gay movement had achieved visibility without actually obtaining substantive access to power" (Vaid Menon 2014). Vaid soberly reminds her reader that while visibility had increased for the gay and lesbian communities of North American, queer people--particularly

queer people of colour--were still vulnerable to harm. Interestingly, while acknowledging that depictions of Gay and Lesbian subjects in mainstream media elided the true diversity of these communities, Nan Alamilla Boyd (1998), unlike Vaid, proposed that certain queer subjects did gain political power from increased visibility. Of course, as Boyd stipulates, it was only those queer subjects who conformed to the palatable versions of queerness found in mainstream media during the 1990's who gained access to power.

The question of whether or not queer visibility empowers queer communities remains hotly debated within the field of queer visibility politics to this day. This question may also be reconfigured as a debate between separatism or reformation. For example, queer theorist Stanimir Panayotov boldly claims that "any institutional memorization is always already implicated in the identitarian, heterosexual paradigm of love and recognition that inevitably leads to universalization, assimilation and the debilitation of difference through the apparent act of embracing it" (Sikora and Firens viii). Subsequently, he argues, "[o]ne has to either change the form of institution or abandon recollection altogether (Panayotov 122). Panayotov's position is echoed by Boyd who similarly argues that "mainstream visibility politics have always been a part of the project of assimilation, and assimilation necessarily projects a disciplined as well as a race and class specific image of the lesbian and gay community" (Boyd 1372). For Boyd, visibility politics is predicated on a belief among its supporters "that lesbians and gay men can achieve full citizenship by breaking through the wall of mainstream invisibility" (Boyd 1372). However, breaking through this wall depends upon appealing to, as Panayotov puts it, the "heterosexual paradigm of love and recognition" (Sikora and Firens viii). For both Panayatov and Boyd, a politics of visibility reinforces the dominating structure of heteronormativity since it depends

upon receiving approval from the heterosexual mainstream in order to access equality in the form of legal rights.

Elsewhere, queer theorists advocate not for the total disavowal and abandonment of a politic of visibility but for the increased production and circulation of more accurate, nuanced and diverse representations of queer subjects and the communities to which they belong. This third position may be found among activists and academics who "seek neither separatism nor assimilation but the reshaping of the public and private spheres so as to give presence and meaning to non-heterosexual desires" (Phelan 57). As actor and activist Laverne Cox argues, “when people have points of reference that are humanizing, that demystifies difference” (Steinmetz 2014). While theorists such as Boyd, Panayatov, Hennessy and more have been highly critical of mainstream media’s incorporation of queer people, characters and narratives, Cox and others have acknowledged the importance of mainstream visibility in destigmatizing trans and other queer identities and educating the North American public on LGBTQ+ issues.

**Transgender Visibility Politics: New Media, New Critique**

Although academic engagement with transgender visibility is relatively new and quite limited in volume, what little has been written provides an excellent starting point from which to develop further critique. Academic writing has tackled defamatory representations of transgender people, with particular focus on transgender women (Serano 2007, Tsai 2010), transgender visibility in alternative media (Fink and Miller 2014, Horak 2014, Dame 2016, Raun 2015, Juhasz 2016) and the recent phenomena of the transgender celebrity figure (Glover 2016, Udy

2016, Lovelock 2017). Other theorists work to unpack representations of transgender subjects, both real and fictionalized, in specific cinematic and commercial television works such as the canonical queer cinema film Boys Don't Cry (Rigney 2003, Halberstam 2001, 2005, Pidduck 2001, Smith 2015) or the recent T.V. hit Transparent (Morse 2016). Finally, a concerted and fruitful effort has been made to collect and assess reactions of transgender people to the emerging popularity of transgender visibility in mainstream media (McInroy and Craig 2015, Cavalcante 2017).

Amidst the diverse critiques that have arisen from transgender visibility research, a few salient points seems to be shared by all. First, all commentators acknowledged that contemporary transgender visibility in mainstream media emerges within an arena that has historically allowed for and profited from defamatory and fetishizing representations of the transgender body. Advertising and marketing theorist Wan-Hsiu Sunny Tsai notes that "mainstream advertising often lingers on the feminization process" of MTF trans women (Tsai 2010). This, she says, effectively defines "trans women in terms of their embodiment of physical femininity" and encourages "the audience to objectify and fetishize trans women" (Tsai 2010).

Tsai's critique is echoed by Julia Serano who writes, "by focusing on the most feminine of artifices, the media evokes the idea that trans women are living out some sort of sexual fetish. This sexualization of trans women's motives for transitioning not only belittles trans women's female identities, but encourages the objectification of women as a whole" (Serano 44). Similarly, Fink and Miller argue that "the dominant representational system [present within mass media] reduces trans sexuality (i.e. the sexuality of trans people) to gender performance or to fetishized images of trans bodies" (Fink and Miller 616). Tsai, Serano, Fink and Miller gesture

towards the linkages between fetishizing representation and stigmatization that accost trans women in North American society and beyond.

Second, many theorists have argued that the inclusion of trans media makers at the site of trans representation is the best catalyst for the creation of more positive, realistic and empowering representations of transgender people. As queer cinema theorist Ruby B. Rich has written, "[w]hen the baton passes from insider to outsider, the terms of cinematic enunciation change abruptly" (Rich 273). This quote, taken from Rich's seminal text New Queer Cinema, points to the limitations of cisgender directors who write, direct, and/or act in films about transgender people. Rich has elsewhere explicitly advocated against cisgender filmmakers producing narratives about transgender experience and history characterizing such productions as a violent misuse of transgender experience.

As Fink and Miller argue "we can combat gender-based violence on a wider scale by challenging myopic images of trans-ness and transition" that proliferate within mainstream media (Fink and Miller 616). This point is echoed by trans visual artist Anthony C. Wagner who similarly writes that "[v]isible heterogeneity and a polyphony of voices" in gender representation "are among the primary tools for change" (Wagner 341). To that effect, Wagner's art utilized self-portraiture to "practice a kind of diversification by increasing the complexity of the transgender imaginary through adding my own visibility" (Wagner 341). In order to diversify representations of transgender experience, it is necessary to ensure that transgender people have control over the production and circulation of trans narratives.

Third, several researchers have pointed out that new media or alternative media constitute important platforms upon which the trans community is able to self-represent, build community, and talk back to mainstream media. As Fink and Miller write, new media spaces are particularly important to the trans community as they permit trans and gender nonconforming people to self-represent without the "long history of obstacles" present in mainstream media (Fink and Miller 615). In a 2014 study on resilience strategies of trans youth, transgender participants cited social media "as a way to empower and validate themselves by connecting with other trans youth" (Singh and Meng 209). Elsewhere, it has been proposed that trans YouTube vloggers "have broken open the mainstream media's stranglehold on trans representation and provided many otherwise vulnerable subjects the opportunity to shape themselves and their world" (Horak 582).

Evidently, trans visibility in alternative or new media spaces differs from that present and available in mainstream media. Academic engagement with new media such as YouTube, Facebook, and various blogging websites reveals that these platforms allow for the production and circulation of self-determined representational work by and for transgender people. Mainstream media constitutes a space that is "circumscribed by the broader goal of corporate organization for which the arena was originally created" (Streeter 81). Alternatively, new media spaces do not experience the same burden of control where content is everywhere regulated by the "ideological constraints" of corporate public relations (Rentschler 2007;529). Subsequently, alternative or new media provide more accessible platforms for trans visibility and self-expression.

This argument is supported by researchers McInroy and Craig (2015) who have centered members of the trans community in their discussions of emergent transgender visibility. In their article “Transgender Representation in Offline and Online Media” McInroy and Craig survey responses from trans youth on new visibility in both mainstream and alternative medias. The study argued that “transgender representation within offline media” (i.e. T.V., film), “remains very limited, problematic and stereotypical” (McInroy and Craig 610). Specifically, trans youth surveyed indicated that transgender representation within offline media was limited compared to lesbian and gay representation and that overall, representations of LGBTQ subjects acted “to reinforce heterosexual, cisgender notions of gender presentation, behavior, and intimate relationships” (McInroy and Craig 610). In contrast, research participants applauded the availability of more positive and nuanced depictions of transgender and gender-queer subjects in online media. Representations of transgender people online “tended to be more fully integrated into storylines and less tokenistic,” the effect being that these “more authentic portrayals normalized transgender identity” (McInroy and Craig 612). Overall, transgender characters in online media were more likely to be depicted as multifaceted subjects whose stories, whether real or fictionalized, did not focus solely on their transgender identity.

Conversely, Andre Cavalcante's 2017 article, "Breaking into Transgender Life" explores the positive, affective capacities of transgender visibility in mainstream media for members of the trans community. Specifically, Cavalcante considers how transgender visibility in mainstream media informs transgender people in their journeys of gender exploration, transition, and/or confirmation. For one research participant in Cavalcante's study, the seminal film Boys Don't Cry (1999) "was a crucial resource in his self-making, igniting a chain of events

that helped him to more fully explore, test, and actualize his transgender identity" (Cavalcante 550). Cavalcante further argues that films such as Boys Don't Cry constitute 'breakout texts', described as those cultural texts which operate "as a first impression to a subaltern identity, and by virtue of being broadly available and visible in popular culture...often initiate this kind of self-exploration" (Cavalcante 550). Thus, breakout texts both inform the transgender individual in their queer identity development as well as introducing and normalizing transgender identity into the mainstream. Calvalcante additionally categorizes the recent popularization of transgender visibility in mainstream media as "a new field of transgender breakout texts" that "constitute a new wave of transgender visibility making important cultural breaks" (552). Of course, Cavalcante does not generalize all 'breakout texts' as positive and emphasizes that each new 'breakout text' that emerges requires individualized critique to assess the text's affective capacities.

In a similar vein, Gross, Tsai and Boyd, while critical of the incorporation of queer subjects into mainstream media, particularly mainstream advertising, acknowledge that inclusion in the mainstream can be politically advantageous for queer communities. As Boyd writes,

> "Mainstream advertisements directed toward lesbian and gay consumers publicly affirm the economic strength of the lesbian and gay community. Advertisements depicting same-sex couples or queer iconography increase the visibility of lesbian and gay lives. This combination of strength and visibility promises to some citizenship and increased access to civil rights" (Boyd 1370).

Tsai also acknowledges that "the new trend of 'out-of-closet' commercials offers clear points of identification for LGBT viewers by featuring easily identifiable LGBT characters,

depicting erotic desire and affection for or between characters of the same sex, and showing support of issues related to the gay rights movement" (Tsai 2010). Tsai's argument draws upon the work of queer visibility theorist Larry Gross who claims that advertising represents the pinnacle of cultural inclusion as advertising "does not claim to depict life as it is but as it should be—life and lives worth emulating." (Gross 233). While each theorist successfully argues that advertising seeks only to represent a niche demographic of LGBTQ+ people, they cannot deny that inclusion in the mainstream can at times serve to empower certain facets of the LGBTQ+ community.

It is important to also acknowledge that although alternative media spaces provide highly accessible platforms for trans visibility, they should not be mistaken as utopian spaces of diverse transgender cultural production. As film and media theorist Laura Horak describes in her 2014 article on trans Youtubers, whose content becomes popular on social media is largely regulated by "existing social hierarchies" of desirability such as "race", "ethnicity", "accent" and body type (Horak 577). While "mainstream representations of trans people" as Horak acknowledges, "are often distancing and objectifying", trans Youtubers "become subjects, rather than mere objects, of representation" (Horak 575-576). And yet, even in alternative media spaces, it still those trans bodies that appeal to patriarchal conventions of desirability whose visibility is most readily consumed and celebrated. This is not due to a lack of available, diverse content but instead gestures to the ways in which consumption is everywhere dictated by a pre-existing social hierarchy of desire.

**Queering Sightlines: Representation Theory and Queer Visibility Politics**

Queer visibility theory and representation theory are two closely related areas of thought. Representation theory considers how media re-presents reality. It postulates that the reality depicted to us in media is never 'authentic' but only a version or mimetic impression of that which exists in the world around us. Moreover, representation theory is concerned with how that which is depicted in media is received by an audience, acknowledging that different audiences will infer different meanings from that which is being represented. Perhaps the foremost authority on this subject is media and cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall. Due to the limited space of this chapter, I will focus my attention in this section upon Hall's contributions to the field of representation theory, concepts which I see as highly useful and which will be central to the arguments I develop in the following chapters.

Hall places great stake in representation, specifically visual representation, stating "[t]he image itself – whether moving or still and whether transmitted by a variety of different media – seems to be, or to have become, the prevalent sign of late-modern culture" (Hall 5). Hall's work in the field of representation theory is largely concerned with demonstrating how images function as tools of socio-cultural communication. At the basis of Hall's work is the assertion that visual representations in media are "always linked with power and that those groups who wield power in a society influence what gets represented through the media" (Hall 3). Subsequently, the images we see in media reflect existing hierarchies of power and should be assessed as signifiers that have the ability to influence currents of power in our societies.

Unlike media theorists before him, Hall "argues for a new view that gives the concept of representation a much more active and creative role in relation to the way people think about the world and their place within it." (Hall 3). It is Hall's position that the images represented in

media have material effects upon their audiences and by extension, all of society. More than simply re-presenting a pre-existing idea or meaning to an audience, visual representation itself possesses the capacity to make meaning. In Hall's own words, an "event" has "no fixed meaning, no real meaning in the obvious sense, until it has been represented" (Hall 7). This is because the way in which an event or idea gets represented will affect the way it is interpreted by its audience. While it is ultimately the audience's interpretation of an event in which meaning is made, the way(s) in which an event is represented will inform that interpretation.

Media studies is largely devoted to critiquing stereotyping as a cultural process that fixes meaning. By 'fix', I mean the privileging of one particular interpretation of an event or idea. As Hall writes, "the attempt to fix it is why power intervenes in representation" (Hall 19). Through the process of stereotyping, meaning is fixed, reducing an entire social group to a miniscule, and usually defamatory, set of characteristics. Hall, among others, argues that media plays a central role in propagating stereotypes that target a number of marginalized groups and communities. As Hall writes, "the struggle to open up stereotypes is often a struggle to increase the diversity of things which subjects can be of – the possibilities of identities which people have not seen represented before". It is a struggle to reject the fixity of meaning that is imposed by and through a dominating ideology such as racism, classism, or homophobia.

However, counteracting stereotyping is not as simple as increasing the circulation of diverse representations of the group or community in question. Instead, one must pry open the stereotype and begin to unpack and disarticulate the power structures which maintain its fixity. As Hall writes, "[t]he very act of opening up the practice by which these closures of imagery have been presented requires one to go into the power of the stereotype itself and begin to, as it

were, subvert, open and expose it from inside" (Hall 21). This is the task of the representation theorist; to utilize discourse to expose the intricacies of power which fix meaning to a subject or community.

The linkages between representational theory and queer visibility politics should be quite clear by this point. Since queer visibility in mainstream media entails the representation of queer subjects, it follows that what is being represented is only one version of reality or a mimetic impression of queer subjectivity. It is arguable that the act of being represented shifts queer people from the position of meaning-making subject or interpreter to object whose meaning is set by the interpretations of others. However, to accept such a position would be to account for all that is represented to us in media as objects of knowledge whose meaning is constantly determined and re-determined with each new audience encountered, which, in turn, is perhaps to neutralize the process of meaning-making all together.

Representation theory allows us to unpack stereotypical depictions of transgender people from the perspective that these representations both articulate and enact power relations. As this thesis will demonstrate in the following chapters, the conditions of where, when and how transgender people are represented in media may guide us to discover which power structures seek to fix meaning to the transgender subject and why. In summary, it could be said that the goal of this project is, as Hall says, to subvert, open and expose from inside the images of the transgender subject represented to us across diverse media platforms.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

As transgender cultural production continues to proliferate across disparate media platforms, so too does transgender studies research grow in tandem. This thesis seeks to contribute to that field at an exciting time in its development. While queer visibility politics remains a hotly contested topic both within and without the boundaries of academia, it is clear that the cultural phenomena of transgender visibility shows no signs of slowing. Subsequently, it has become necessary to deepen and complicate our critical attention toward transgender visibility in both mainstream and alternative media spaces. This thesis seeks to apply the existing academic literature on queer visibility politics to multiple permutations of transgender visibility across mainstream and alternative medias.

In so doing, it is necessary to make transparent the methodology which will guide this exploration. As stated in the introduction, this thesis will consider transgender visibility across six primary cultural texts. These six texts are divided into two groups which will be compared and contrasted in two adjoining chapters. The first group of texts is made up of cinematic works which are united by several shared characteristics. These are *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013) and *The Danish Girl* (2015). Each film features a transgender character at the centre of its narrative. Each film was made by a cisgender director, and each transgender character found within is played by a cisgender actor. Finally, each of these films has been nominated for multiple awards by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, commonly referred to as the Academy Awards or the Oscars. Together, these films might be seen as representative of Hollywood's take on transgender people and issues.

The second group of cultural texts has received much less mainstream praise. These are *By Hook or By Crook* (2001), *Mosaic* (2014), and *Her Story* (2016). Unlike the Academy Award nominees and winners, these films are all made by transgender directors. Each film centers on one or two transgender characters or subjects, all of whom are portrayed by transgender people. Finally, none of these films was afforded circulation within mainstream media and thus each remains a squarely 'alternative' cultural text.

These six media texts have been chosen to illustrate the diversity of transgender visibility in the contemporary age. Moreover, the choice to divide the texts into two subgroups is not to suggest that all transgender cultural production fits squarely into categorical divisions of mainstream/alternative, cis-made/trans-made, etc., but rather because the similarities that unite some texts while excluding others provides fertile grounds for critical analysis. My purpose here is to examine transgender cultural production across disparate media to query whether these cultural texts are empowering, problematic or somewhere in between. The mainstream films selected were chosen for their effort to include trans characters at the centre of their narratives. Moreover, these films have enjoyed wide circulation and are recognized as important cultural moments in the recent history of transgender visibility. As such, they have garnered much critical analysis from queer communities. The alternative cultural texts selected were likewise chosen for their efforts to include transgender people at the centre of their narratives. In comparison, these texts have received far less critical attention than their mainstream counterparts and so represent exciting new examples of transgender cultural production.

Having selected the cultural texts to be examined, I moved to develop a criteria for judging these six instances of transgender visibility. This criteria takes the form of a rubric of four

questions that are informed by two primary sources: 1) academic writing on queer visibility politics, examined at length in the previous chapter; and, 2) writing from transgender activists on contemporary transgender visibility. As a cisgender researcher and critic, it is imperative that I keep the voices, opinions and critiques of transgender people central throughout this project in order to avoid the pitfall of appropriating and misrepresenting their politics. At the centre of this commitment is the understanding that those who seek to work toward allyship with communities to which they do not belong must be careful to speak in conversation with, and not overtop of, those communities. This thesis does not, by any means, pretend to represent a voice of authority on these topics. The perspectives of transgender people are the only authority on transgender cultural production and visibility and, as such, should remain central to any and all discussions on this subject matter.

Before outlining the rubric, it is necessary to clarify some terminology that I use in this rubric and this thesis. I define the term transgender in accordance with the description given in the inaugural edition of Transgender Studies Quarterly. This definition asserts that "[t]he word *transgender* entered widespread use as an umbrella term for describing a range of gender-variant identities and communities within the United States in the early 1990s" (Williams 232). This definition includes but is not limited to gender categories such as transfemme, transmasculine, genderqueer, gender non-conforming and gender non-binary. I believe the slipperiness of TSQ's description to be intentional and reflective of the fact that the multiple identities found under the umbrella term 'transgender' are "fundamentally heterogeneous" (Cavalcante 548).

It is also necessary to provide working definitions for the terms mainstream media and alternative media which are central to the arguments of this project. I define mainstream media

as network television channels such as ABC, FOX, CBC, MTV, national news channels such as the CBC (Canada) or CNN (U.S.A), Hollywood films which are advertised through network television as well as all advertising which appears on network television, large newspapers such as the National Post (Canada) or The New York Times (U.S.A.), and websites such as MSNBC. These platforms are both easily accessible and reach large audiences. Mainstream media is furthermore controlled by "the broader goal of corporate organization for which the arena was originally created" (Streeter 81). This is to say that, due to the ownership model of mainstream media in which media conglomerates are owned and managed by large corporations, content which appears upon this channels is regulated by corporate owners and their central goal of profit maximization.

In comparison, alternative media outlets tend to be smaller in scale and less profitable than their mainstream counterparts. Online platforms may allow for alternative media sites to flourish without the burden of overhead fees necessary to producing network television or Hollywood cinema. One such example of this is the video sharing platform Vimeo which allows filmmakers to publish their projects for free on the website. Projects published on Vimeo can be circulated easily through embedded links developed specifically for use on social media platforms. The same is true for the popular site YouTube. Because content on these two sites is entirely user-generated, the platforms depend upon their user base to both upload and consume a massive depository of content. Many transgender media makers, as we will see in subsequent chapters, have used such platforms to circulate their work. Further examples of alternative media include social media websites such as Tumblr, personal websites of transgender activists such as alokvmenon.com or queer-interest news sites such as The Advocate (advocate.com).

In order to effectively assess the diverse examples of transgender visibility considered in the following chapters, I have developed a rubric of questions that grounds my discussion of the cultural texts chosen. The rubric is divided into four sections which each summarize a salient critique put forth by transgender community members in response to unfair, biased or stereotypical representations of transgender people in the media. The critiques reflected in the rubric are not meant to serve as finite rules of representation in the case of transgender media visibility. Unlike the popular Bechdel Test, the rubric does not operate on a pass/fail basis. Instead, the critiques informing the rubric are used as entry points into the subsequent discussions of the six chosen cultural texts. These are critiques that have been put forth by members of the transgender community and echoed by transgender studies theorists. These concerns are valid but should not be interpreted as hard guidelines for what representation must or must not do in order to be alternately deemed progressive or problematic. Each film, even each scene within a film, must be examined in its own right. These critiques are merely entry points intended to foster critical analysis and conversation on minority representation and visibility.

Question 1: This set of questions arises out of concern for the tokenization of trans people. Thus, questions following from this include:

- How does the transgender character compare to the other characters in the narrative?
- Is transgender identity the predominating aspect of the transgender character?
- Does the character have multiple interests, desires and worries?
- Are they a multidimensional character or just a novelty?

As we will see in the coming chapters, transgender people are often made token in order to provide a symbolic gesture of diversity within a film or television program. Tokenization of transgender people primarily occurs when their transgender identity is either the only salient feature of their character or their trans identity is made into a mockery. Tokenization is closely related to fetishization, a process in which transgender identity becomes a point of fixation that is often made into erotic spectacle. A common example of transgender fetishization occurs in media texts in which the transgender person 'reveals' their transgender identity through a dramatic moment in which their physical anatomy is exposed to the audience (Serano 2007, Tsai 2010). Fetishization also occurs in media texts in which the feminization process becomes consummate of a transgender woman's female identity. As Tsai writes, "[b]y defining trans women in terms of their embodiment of physical femininity" the audience is both encourage to objectify their female form and are assured "that trans women's femaleness is merely artificial and thus not frightening" (Tsai 2010). Transgender activists have suggested that fetishized representations of trans people in media contribute to a culture of transmisogyny and may even influence rates of violence against transgender people. At the very least, such depictions surely represent unrealistic, grossly sensationalist conceptions of transgender identity.

Question 2: This group of questions considers what is at stake in the representation of violence against transgender people in various medias.

- Is the transgender character the only character within the narrative who experiences violence?
- Who is telling the story of violence and what is at stake in so doing?

- Is it to demonstrate a harsh reality of systemic violence to the audience, or does the violence seem gratuitous?
- Does it seem that transgender lives are livable in spite of violence?

Violence, homelessness, and suicidality are daily realities for many transgender people (Grant et al 2011, Compton and Bridges 2016). Subsequently, encounters with social, economic, and physical precarity may be a component or a central theme of a narrative focusing on transgender subjects. When violence occurs, is the blame for violence ultimately placed upon its individual perpetrators and systemic transmisogyny or the transgender individual for failure to conform to gender ideals? Are transgender lives represented as livable? It is important to remember that when transgender people, especially transgender people of colour, are frequently depicted experiencing violence, it reinforces a system of oppression in which bodies that do not conform to traditional ideals of gender presentation are violently eradicated (Butler 1993, Ahmed 2010). Ask, who is telling the story of violence and what is at stake in so doing? Is it to demonstrate a harsh reality of systemic violence to the audience or is it mere gratuity?

Question 3: These questions seek to interrogate the treatment of gender more broadly within the space of a narrative.

- How is gender represented within the narrative?
- Is there room to subvert traditional gender roles or does the text work to reaffirm the normalcy of gender binary logic?
- Is transgender identity discussed, and, if so, what is the manner and content of those discussions?

Theorist Michael Lovelock has argued that transgender narratives of being 'trapped in the wrong body' have become overrepresented in mainstream media because such logic affirms the centrality of the body as the primary site where gender is confirmed and validated. This is not to say that the expression 'trapped in the wrong body' does not adequately represent the feelings of many trans people: it certainly does. However, as Lovelock argues, when this is the only narrative of transgender identity depicted in mainstream media, it creates an illusion that this feeling is at the core of all transgender people's experiences. This is one example of how the representation of gender can become scripted to conform to heteronormative, gender binary logic even within narratives of transgender experience.

While it is certainly important to be wary of the presence of heteronormative logics, such as gender binarism, within transgender narratives, it must be asserted that the celebration of gender nonconformity within certain forms of transgender representation should not entail a totalizing or outright rejection of transgender characters who sustain aspects of the gender binary. As transgender theorists such as Vivian K. Namaste, Henry Rubin and Jay Prosser have pointed out, there is an existing, problematic habit within queer theory, represented by such theorists as Judith Halberstam and Julianne Pidduck, concerning their tendency to celebrate, and at times even fetishize gender nonconformity while condemning (trans)gender conformity. Such a perspective invalidates those transgender subjects who reflect and/or embody traditional gender ideals. It is important that the users of this rubric do not make the same error while assessing various forms of transgender representation.

Question 4: This set of questions arises from critiques made by many transgender communities against the use of cisgender actors for transgender roles.

- When a transgender character is featured in a film or television narrative, is that character portrayed by a member of the transgender community?
- If not, what were the decisions which lead the production team to choose a non-transgender person to portray a transgender character?
- Why couldn't a transgender actor be hired for this part?

It is by no means necessary that each person employed to work on a given film or television show be self-identified as transgender. However, it is certainly necessary that the perspectives and opinions of transgender people are able to dictate the shape of transgender narratives. Due to explicit critique from many transgender people against the use of cisgender actors in transgender roles, the position of this thesis is that a film or television program which utilizes a cisgender actor to play a transgender character must be subjected to rigorous scrutiny. This is not to say however that the employment of cisgender actors in the roles of transgender characters is universally problematic. For example, one could imagine a role in which the transgender character appears in the narrative pre-transition in which a cisgender actor may be better suited for the role. At stake in this critique is the risk that transgender narratives may become appropriated by cisgender filmmakers. Furthermore, transgender narratives may be misconstrued through inadequate or biased representational work produced by media makers who exist outside of transgender communities and thus transgender experiences.

As much as this thesis seeks to produce a solid rubric for the study of transgender media, there is always room for contradiction and nuance. The questions gathered above draw upon salient critiques made by transgender studies scholars and transgender activists who are concerned with transgender visibility and representation in media. Their concerns should be

upheld and carried into our analysis of transgender media. However, it would be nearly impossible to take up these critiques and turn them into a regulatory schema of/for trans representation. Each new text must be considered in its own right while also acknowledging that artistic production does not occur in a vacuum; it is always already implicated in, and, to varying extents, implicated by, the culture in which it is produced.

As is evident in the subsequent chapters of this thesis, even in an instance of seemingly problematic transgender representation there is still the possibility that the text in question may yield valuable depictions of transgender life or affect positive outcomes for transgender people. Moreover, one may also imagine instances in which seemingly defamatory depictions of transgender people may be employed subversively in order to critique such cultural stereotypes and expose them from within. Accordingly, there is also the possibility that a cultural text made by and for transgender people may unintentionally replicate problematic understandings of transgender experience. Put simply, the issue is never black and white. As Hall suggests, meaning is made in the reception and interpretation of a media text by its successive audiences. And so, it is as one audience member, with the understanding that my own analysis will inevitably bear its own limitations as well as unique insights, that I approach the six chosen cultural texts.

## Chapter 3: Transgender Representation in Mainstream Media

The films *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), and *The Danish Girl* (2015) represent three examples of recent transgender visibility in the mainstream. Each of these films has enjoyed commercial success including multiple Academy Award and Golden Globe nominations. These films, while both popular and celebrated, have not escaped criticism from transgender communities. As such, it is necessary to broaden and complicate the cultural conversation on transgender visibility in the mainstream in order to assess what this representation may tell us about modern, socio-historical knowledges of transgender people in North American culture.

I have chosen these three films as primary cultural texts for several reasons. As previously iterated, each film has garnered its fair share of praise as well as scrutiny. While complex in nature, these criticisms, in general, have exposed that the films exhibit both overt and covert derision, as well as defamation and "othering" that are rampant in representations of transgender characters. Much criticism has laid blame for the problematic depictions of transgender characters upon the cisgender actors, directors and writers who control the manner in which these figures come to be represented. In each selected film, the transgender character depicted was played by a cisgender actor. Despite their at times problematic subject matter, the films discussed herein nonetheless represent canonical transgender media moments from recent cinematic history.

Before applying my critical rubric questions to each film, I will provide a concise overview of the academic attention already paid to each. *Boys Don't Cry* is based upon the true story of Brandon Teena, a trans youth whose brutal murder in 1993 received national attention.

Due to the popular attention to both Brandon's real life murder and the film adaptation of his life story, *Boys Don't Cry* has become a centerpiece of transgender studies scholarship. Much has been made of the film's use of 'the transgender gaze' which "establishes the legitimacy and durability of Brandon's gender not simply by telling the tragic tale of his murder but by forcing spectators to adopt, if only for a short time, Brandon's gaze" (Halberstam 2001; 294). Halberstam, among other reputable transgender studies scholars, has discussed director Kimberly Peirce's use of gaze to position Brandon as a relatable trans subject who "invites political, emotional and corporeal allegiances" between Brandon and his audience (Pidduck 101). In fact, queer film theorist Melissa Rigney has gone so far as to state that *Boys Don't Cry* represents the first time in cinematic history that a trans character "was not demonized as either killer, sexual predator, or deranged psychopath" (Rigney 4).

While at first glance *Boys Don't Cry* may appear to be a shining example of progressive transgender representation, the film has also received a fair amount of criticism from the queer academic community. At the forefront of this criticism are arguments against the manner in which Brandon's rape and murder was depicted in the film. As Pidduck warns, "[o]nscreen rape can symbolically repeat the violation either by facilitating sadistic identification with the rapist, or traumatic identification with the victim" (Pidduck 101). Furthermore, "the rape of a film's protagonist can annihilate the subjectivity that offers the primary point of identification" (Pidduck 101). If this last point holds true for *Boys Don't Cry*, the identificatory relationship between Brandon and his audience established through the transgender gaze is, arguably, annihilated in the same moment that Brandon is brutally murdered.

Likewise, the death of Rayon in *Dallas Buyers Club* has been criticized by both activist and academic transgender communities. While both Rayon and protagonist Ron Woodroof die from AIDS, only Rayon's death is depicted in the film. At the film's close, Ron is shown riding a bull, happy, and in good physical condition. It is only through the addition of postscript text that the audience is told about Ron's death which occurs several years after the close of the narrative. Ford suggests that the differing treatment of each character's death clearly establishes that "the point of the narrative is the 'redemption' of Woodroof, the homophobic male-identified character" whereas "Rayon, the female-identified character, is the sacrifice that enables this" (Ford 139). Ford moreover argues that due to the ways in which Rayon's participation in street economics and queer community spaces was depicted, her character became one that "mainstream audiences would not relate to—except as an outsider" (Ford 138). Specifically, Ford argues that Rayon's treatment within the narrative "reflects the hegemonic views of society, which marginalizes, shadows, and criminalizes participation in street economies, particularly those related to recreational drug use and adult industry work" (Ford 138).

Finally, the recent film *The Danish Girl* has yet to receive much attention from the transgender academic community. However, much insight on the film and Redmayne's portrayal of Lile Elbe, the first known recipient of gender confirmation surgery, may be found in the writing of transgender cultural critics. One such article, written by Carol Grant, a transwoman, asserts that Redmayne's recreation of Lile Elbe "performs womanhood by way of stereotype" (Grant 2015). Grant is also critical of director Tom Hooper, stating that Hooper "exaggerates and conflates feminine imagery to the point of parodizing them. His camera doesn’t

linger, or observe, or examine—it leers" (Grant 2015). Grant's accusations, which do not stand alone, are serious and should not be taken for granted[1].

I now move to apply the rubric put forth in the methodology chapter to each film beginning with *Boys Don't Cry*. I have opted to apply the entirety of the rubric one film at a time in order to illustrate how the rubric enables its user to craft a succinct critique of a given film. Once the rubric has been applied to all three films, I will discuss the findings as well as compare the analysis that arises from the application of the rubric to different films.

**Boys Don't Cry**

Question 1: Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* presents the story of Brandon Teena, a transgender man[2] faced with the challenge of finding community and belonging in 1990's rural Nebraska. Brandon is the central character of the narrative and, with due credit to writer/director Kimberly Peirce, his character is far from unidimensional. Brandon exhibits all the fears and desires, hopes and dreams of a youth attempting to breaks the bonds of a small town upbringing in order to find a community in which he will finally belong. For Brandon, this struggle is two fold. Brandon navigates the road of self-learning, finding love and acceptance within a new

---

1 Similar arguments may be found in the writing of cultural critics such as Walt Heyer (2016) and Glenn Dunks (2016)

2 While in *Boys Don't Cry* Brandon uses male pronouns while referring to himself, the real Brandon Teena's gender identity is not so certain. Many believe that Brandon identified as male. However, there is much evidence of general switching of names and pronouns during Brandon's life. Some of this confusion and uncertainty comes across in the documentary – The Brandon Teena story (1998) that was made a year prior to the docudramatic *Boys Don't Cry*. It is possible that in current times Brandon would ascribed to a non-binary identity, to an FTM identity, or perhaps to some other identification altogether. We cannot know for sure and we cannot know what vocabulary was even available to Brandon to articulate his/their self-understanding given the time period and rural setting in which he/they lived.

community, while also contending with the pressure to pass as male. As a young man who yearns for rootedness and belonging, Brandon is a character that Peirce's audience may easily relate to.

Question 2: In *Boys Don't Cry*, violence represents a principal component of Brandon's life story. The film's climax scene depicts Brandon's murder at the hand's of John and Tom. The murder occurs just days after he is violently beaten and gang raped by the two men. While these two scenes of violence are tragically accurate to the real life events of Brandon Teena's last days, one must question what is at stake when violence against a minority figure is represented in film. In her book *The Art of Cruelty*, art critique and public intellectual, Maggie Nelson writes, "there is an excellent argument to be made that any rape scene, at this point in cinematic history, is gratuitous. Here, the refusal to manufacture consent to watch bears a strong, albeit metaphorical relationship, to the refusal to manufacture consent to tolerate unwanted sexual incursions" (Nelson 95). I would add to Nelson's argument that when the rape of a minority figure is depicted in film, (especially a minority figure whose real life, extra-filmic community experiences disproportionate amounts of violence) it is not only gratuitous but may in fact lend itself to supporting the overdetermined levels of violence that plague that community. Put simply, the repeated representation of anti-transgender violence onscreen may inadvertently serve to normalize violence against transgender people offscreen. Brandon's rape and eventual murder in *Boys* is historically accurate, not only because Brandon Teena experienced such extreme violence in his lifetime but also because trans bodies are all too often subjected to both the psychological and corporeal violence of heteronormativity.

Question 3: In *Boys*, relationships between central characters are everywhere regulated by codes of gender performance. Specifically, gender binary logic determines the conditions of

possibility for each person with whom Brandon comes into contact. While in Fall's City, Brandon is exposed, perhaps for the first time, to cultural rituals of masculinity. These rituals predominantly take the form of stunts such as 'bumper skiing' and drag racing. Additionally, Brandon is seen engaging more than once in bar fights to defend his female companions. This arguably constitutes another rite of masculinity for Brandon. Brandon's participation in such rituals is necessary step to becoming inculcated into male community. For example, when Tom and John invite Brandon to bumper ski, the game acts as both his initiation into their friend group and his initiation as 'one of the guys'.

While Brandon's masculinity in these instances is performed in the same manner and to the same extent as the other men in the narrative, there are other moments within the film where Brandon's masculinity is made into a spectacle in a way that the other male characters' simply are not. Brandon is shown many times stuffing his underwear with socks and other items to create a mimetic outline of a penis. Brandon is also shown repeatedly looking in the mirror while stroking his jawline as though feeling for a scruff that is not there. Lastly, Brandon is repeatedly shown binding his breasts to hide them as evidence of his female body. While acts such as binding and stuffing are indeed daily realities for many transmasculine people, the directorial choice to repeatedly linger on such actions risks portraying his masculinity as mere performance rather than reality.

In the world portrayed in *Boys,* the limitations of traditional gender roles may not be subverted for long. The viewer is led to see that Brandon’s gender nonconformity is the reason that Tom and John feel compelled to rape and murder him. While a discerning viewer may be able to glean that violence in *Boys* is a consequence of heteronormative logics of gender identity,

I am concerned that the film may ultimate work to reinforce that problematic ideology. Unfortunately, for the real life Brandon, the prejudice of his friends culminates in his violent assault and murder. Although the film is historically accurate, the representation of heteronormative violence in a mainstream film has the potential to inadvertently reinforce heteronormativity. By depicting Brandon's violent murder at the hands of Tom and John, the film places the majority of the burden of heteronormativity upon its only transgender character.

Question 4: In 1999, actress Hilary Swank won an Academy Award for her depiction of Brandon in *Boys*. Since then, the decision to cast Swank in the role of Brandon as well as her Academy Award victory have come under widespread critique from transgender communities. Of course, *Boys* rests within a long history of filmmakers opting to cast cisgender actors in trans roles. Many trans activists have criticized such casting decisions, stating that the choice to use a cisgender actor reinforces the harmful stereotype that trans women are simply men in disguise and vice versa[3].

**Dallas Buyers Club**

Question 1: *Dallas Buyers Club* is first and foremost a story about Ron Woodruff, a man diagnosed with HIV who must contend with looming death and an ineffective medical system. A roguish cowboy, Ron comprises a vigilante figure bent on subverting the bureaucracy of the healthcare system in order to secure effective HIV treatment. In comparison, Rayon is a supporting character whose transgender identity is her predominant feature. As a queer subject who is continuously mocked and harassed throughout the film, Rayon fits within the trope of the

3 See Opam 2016, The Hollywood Reporter 2017, Framke 2016, and Signorile 2017

"pathetic transsexual". This term, coined by Julia Serano in her seminal book *Whipping Girl*, describes a transfeminine character who fails to pass as a woman, usually for the purpose of generating comedic effect within a film. Serano references examples of "pathetic transsexual" characters such as John Lithgow's Roberta Muldoon in the 1982 comedy *The World According to Garp* and Terence Stamp's 1994 role as Bernadette in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Serano 2007).

While Leto's Rayon fits within the history of the "pathetic transsexual", the character plays into a second, equally problematic stereotype, that of the 'hooker with a heart of gold'. This stereotype, which can be found in mainstream films such as *Pretty Woman* and *Moulin Rouge*, features a sex worker who, despite her disreputable career, is a morally-grounded character. In suite, Rayon is portrayed as not only morally-grounded, but morally superior to Ron. From the point that the buyers club is established, Ron refuses treatment to anyone who is unable to foot the $400 membership fee. Comparatively, when receiving AZT treatments in a clinical trial, Rayon promises to share her dosage with a friend at a reduced cost. Rayon is also consistently friendly to Ron despite his overt transphobia. She agrees to help him with his business and eventually saves the buyers club by cashing in her life insurance policy. For these reasons I argue that Rayon is not a one-dimensional character, though her treatment within the film remains questionable at best because it has the qualities of both tokenism and participates in the stereotypical tropes of the 'pathetic transsexual' and 'hooker with a heart of gold'.

Question 2: Despite Rayon's moral fiber, there is little space for the film's audience to understand or empathize with Rayon as more than a tragic outsider. While Rayon does not experience overt violence, the manner in which she is positioned as social outcast by the film, as

well as the film's choice to depict her death, constitute examples of covert violence. While Ron's death is represented in post-text at the film's conclusion, Rayon's death comparatively occurs before the film's close. At the time of her death Rayon is alone in the hospital "returning her to the setting where audiences first met her" (Ford 139). Conversely, Ron concludes the film looking visibly healthier than he did at the beginning of the narrative. He has returned to the rodeo and is once again bull riding. As Ford writes, the differential treatments of the two character's deaths demonstrates that "the point of the narrative is the “redemption” of Woodroof, the homophobic male−identified character; Rayon, the female−identified character, is the sacrifice that enables this" (Ford 139). Moreover, the frequency with which the death of transgender characters are depicted in film and television serves to propagate the idea that transgender lives are inherently unlivable. As one will note by the end of this chapter, in all three films surveyed the transgender characters die before the film's conclusion. Subsequently, Rayon's death in *Dallas Buyers Club* participates in the broad and problematic tradition of transgender death represented on screen.

Question 3: The performance and regulation of gender is an important component of the film's narrative. Ron is a rodeo man, a highly traditional masculine role that is also intimately tied to American nationalism, colonialism and white supremacy. When diagnosed with HIV, Ron takes the doctor's announcement as an attack upon his heterosexuality. Importantly, the successful approximation of heterosexuality is twin to the maintenance of his masculine identity. When Ron's friends learn of his diagnosis they suggest he is gay by labelling him with feminine attributes. Clearly, in the Texas society of the 1970's to which Ron belonged, homosexual desires were antithetical to traditional masculinity. Likewise, an HIV/AIDS diagnosis at that time was

equivalent to being labelled as gay by society due to the rampant scapegoating of the gay community for the introduction of HIV into North America as well as the prevalence of the disease within the gay community. When Ron's friends learn of his HIV+ status they determine that his heterosexuality as well as his masculinity are compromised and he is permanently excluded from the community to which he formerly belonged.

Comparatively, Rayon's trans identity is never made a point of analysis in the film. In fact, her trans identity is not remarked upon except when it is being ridiculed by Ron and other characters within the narrative. In one striking scene, Rayon dons masculine clothing in order to visit her father at work and to request that her life insurance policy be cashed in to save the buyers club. In the span of their brief conversation, Rayon's father insinuates that being transgender was a choice that Rayon made, and simultaneously, a choice to be disowned by him and the rest of her family, to which she replies "It wasn't a choice, Dad". This line is Rayon's only verbalized defense of her trans identity. Due to Rayon's treatment by her family, Ron, and others as well as the fact that she is the only character within the film whose death is portrayed, it seems that within the universe of *Dallas Buyers Club* there is no room for the normality of traditional gender roles to be subverted.

Question 4: *Dallas Buyers Club*, like *Boys Don't Cry,* has been criticized for casting cisgender actor Jared Leto in the role of Rayon[4]. Like Swank, Leto received a major accolade for his performance -- the Academy Award for best supporting actor. As Laverne Cox says, while nevertheless agreeing that Leto's performance was brilliant, "when people who don't know anything about trans folks and trans women see the very sexy Jared Leto and his beard accepting

4 See Truitt 2014

an Oscar for playing a trans woman, the message that it sends is that trans women are really men" (Signorile 2017). Due to the fact that Leto is such a widely recognizable celebrity, his depiction of Rayon may ultimately work to enforce the stereotype of the "deceptive transsexual" wherein trans women are simply men in disguise (Serano 36).

**The Danish Girl**

Question 1: *The Danish Girl* follows Lile Elbe as she undergoes groundbreaking gender confirmation surgery in 1920's Denmark. In the film's retelling of her life, after posing as a ballerina for a portrait one afternoon, Lile's desire to live as a woman is awakened. Lile's transition process comprises the majority of the film's attention. Subsequently, Lile's transgender identity becomes her foremost characteristic. The film communicates her transition through scenes that linger upon Lile's feminization process in which the young artist dons make-up, caresses women's clothing, and stares at herself in the mirror while tucking. In one particularly memorable scene, Lile visits a brothel where she watches a stripper perform an erotic dance, mimicking her movements in an apparent attempt to learn how to approximate feminine sensuality. In another scene, Lile takes a job working as a sales girl in a department store where her boss tells her, and her all-female coworkers, that they are there to "perform" for their customers. As critics of the film have already pointed out, these scenes effectively tokenize Lile's process of transition as a mere performance of hyper-femininity.

Despite the film's problematic representation of Lile's transition, her character is decidedly multi-dimensional. Lile undergoes significant identity transformations throughout the film that are not reserved to her body: changing careers; awakening to a new sexuality; and

developing a new community. However, due to the performative manner in which her transition process is represented, Lile's character remains limited. As Grant wrote of Redmayne's Lile,

> "it's admittedly hard to distance myself from this movie when I see some of my own experience portrayed in it: the secret walks outside, the stares of other men, the longing looks at the mirror, the debilitating dysphoria, all played out here like they're part of a transgender playbook, ticking out the checkboxes. But when I see the form that that experience has taken in this film, and the lens with which Hooper uses to depict it, the emotional connection is lost, replaced only with discomfort" (Grant 2015).

For Grant, despite the complexity of Lile's character and her transition process, she yet sees Redmayne's performance as, ultimately, an instance of femininity being "reduced to caricature". Grant's argument is bolstered by the fact that the other women in the film are comparatively not shown participating in similar approximating acts of feminine presentation. In the very scenes which sought to communicate the complex process of Lile's transition, gender was inadvertently rendered a corporeal performance that necessitates extreme approximations of traditional feminine presentation.

Question 2: Violence hovers at the periphery of Lile's life throughout *The Danish Girl*. As Lile begins to enter into the public domain as a woman for the first time, her safety feels always precarious and continuously under threat. While living in Paris post-transition, Lile is attacked by two men while walking through a park when they are unable to place her gender. In other scenes, the audience sees Lile facing the gaze of men and women as they attempt to read her body. Lile is likewise subjected to violent scrutiny before transition when she seeks medical

attention for her sense of dysphoria. Lile's transgender identity is labeled as various forms of psychosis by medical professionals. In one scene, Lile is nearly condemned to an insane asylum and must crawl through a window in order to escape. Another doctor recommends painful radiation therapy localized to Lile's genitalia which leaves her injured for several weeks. While these scenes doubtlessly reflect a harsh but common reality, one must wonder what is at stake in depicting such scenes of transphobic violence? While the instances of violence Lile is subjected to within the space of the narrative may indeed be historically accurate to Elbe's life, the visual representation of violence against a minority figure in film may serve to confirm the idea that it is impossible to survive as a trans person.

Question 3: In *The Danish Girl*, gender is an oppositional dichotomy, a two sided coin of identity upon which Lile transitions from one side to the other. Lile struggles with her masculine physicality, finding refuge in adopting the dress, mannerisms and affects of conventional femininity. Lile describes herself as a woman made by god but with a body failed by nature. When Lile meets German doctor Dr. Kurt Warnekros, she becomes fixated on the possibility of becoming anatomically female and becomes the first known recipient of gender confirmation surgery. For Lile (and perhaps for the film) it seems that in order to be a woman, it is necessary to alter the body to confirm to existing biological standards of sexual assignment or designation. Certainly for the real life Lile this was the case and, if her experience was similar to that of the film's Lile, her transition brought her great relief and affirmation in regards to her transfeminine identity.

However, the question I am left to ask is, does Lile's audience register that she is a woman before her surgery? Do they understand that she is still a woman even during the period of her

life lived as Einar, that Lile, in her own words "was always there. She was always waiting"? In short, does the film work to establish that there are no preconditions (like the requirement of surgical and/or hormonal transformation) to being a "real woman"? These questions are difficult to answer since Lile herself may have felt that surgery was the only way to truly become a woman. With respect to the fact that Lile lived in a time where there was absolutely zero visibility of trans people, let alone visibility for trans people who chose not to undergo hormonal or surgical transitions, it is entirely plausible that she regarded femininity as something unequivocally rooted in biology. And yet, I am wary of the potential that the film may be replicating rudimentary understandings on transgenderism for a modern audience.

Moreover, in the contemporary political climate, the push to have people recognized for their felt gender, whether or not they have chosen to undergo medical transition, is still underway. Currently, transgender identity is classifies as a disorder by The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, a text published by The American Psychiatric Association in 2013 which offers a standardized criteria for the diagnoses of mental disorders. While many transgender activists have pushed for the classification to be change so that transgender identity is not designated as a disorder, other activists believe the designation is necessary to securing prescriptions for hormones and access to surgery. Clearly, almost a century later, the issue remains complicated.

Question 4: Perhaps the ambivalence raised in the last section is due in part to the decision to cast a famous cisgender male actor in the role of Lile. Like Jared Leto, Eddie Redmayne's is a widely recognized celebrity. And it is possible that this is the reason why Lile's femininity seems so performative, even artificial, while her time spent living as a man does not

seems equally forced. As Carol Grant has asserted, Redmayne "reduces" Lile's femininity to "caricature" producing "a faux-transsexuality for cis people" (Grant 2015). Grant also argues that the lingering attention payed to Lile's process of feminization is "hyperbolic", subjecting her femininity to a fetishizing gaze that the other female characters in the film, conversely, do not experience. Reflexively, Redmayne's portrayal of Lile pre-transition perhaps appears so comfortable precisely because he is a cisgender actor portraying a cis-presenting man. Grant is accurate in her argument against the film, laying blame upon cisgender director Tom Hooper and lead actor Eddie Redmayne for producing a "regressive, reductive and harmful" depiction of transgender identity.

**Comparative Analysis and Concluding Remarks**

Once applied, the rubric facilitated the production of an insightful review of the three chosen texts. While by no means all-encompassing, the rubric enabled a multi-tire analysis of the manner by which transgenderism was communicated through these three films. The rubric assisted in diagnosing biases in the writing, acting and directing of transgender characters. Additionally, rather than enforcing a prescriptive and definitive set of rules by which to judge cultural texts, the rubric's questions left room for ambivalence or grey areas within its user's critique, a feature which lends itself to the development of more nuanced analysis and conversation.

Furthermore, when applied to multiple films in an essay format such as this, the rubric enables its user to conduct comparative analysis by noting commonalities or differentiations between cultural texts. One important similarity shared among all three films was the presence of

a strict dichotomy between the trans character and a heteronormative society. In each film, the trans character is circumscribed by an environment of extreme, anti-queer oppression. In *Boys*, Brandon navigates the conservative spaces of rural America. In *Dallas*, Rayon must contend with the rampant homophobia of 1970's Texas. Finally, in *The Danish Girl*, Lile struggles to affirm her womanhood while living in the bourgeoise societies of 1920's Western Europe. These are three environments of extreme heteronormativity where the conditions of possibility for queer subjects are intensely limited. The dichotomy between queer subjects and an intolerant society is a classic one. Such scenarios provide fertile grounds for writers to create conflict. One may even go so far as to say that this classic dichotomy is relied on too frequently by cisgender writers. Critically, the continuous representation of queer subjects contending with societal oppression in onscreen may ultimately serve to reinforce the prevalence of that same dichotomy offscreen.

Through comparative analysis one may also note that each film in question made the decision to depict the death of its transgender character. While, as previously stated, in *Boys* and *The Danish Girl* the deaths of both characters are historically accurate, the fact that it is the trans character alone whose death is depicted in the space of the narrative is problematic for several reasons I have previously discussed in this chapter. Ultimately, the choice to depict the death of a transgender character reinforces the notion that queer subjects cannot survive in heteronormative societies. They must either conform or die.

While the rubric has thus far been discussed as a tool for textual review, I hope it has become clear by this point that the rubric may additionally serve as a resource for media makers as they write and/or direct transgender characters. Hopefully, by pointing toward common

representation pitfalls, the rubric will enable its user to avoid problematic depictions of transgender subjects and, in turn, create more nuanced and empowered transgender characters.

## Chapter 4: Trans Visibility in Alternative Media

*By Hook or by Crook* (2001), *Mosaic* (2014), and *Herstory* (2016) are three alternative media texts that centre on transgender characters and issues. *By Hook or By Crook* follows Shy and Valentine as they begin a life of petty crime in 1990s San Francisco. *Mosaic* is a recent documentary on the 2012 travels of Markus "Star" Harwood-Jones as he travels across Canada and the United States relying entirely upon the support of transgender community members for his survival. Finally, the web series *Her Story* explores the lives of fictionalized trans and queer women as they navigate the LA dating scene. These three texts were chosen for a few critical reasons. *By Hook or By Crook* has been heralded as "the first genderqueer feature [film]" by queer cinema theorist Ruby B. Rich (Rich 273). It has received a number of awards from various queer film festivals[5] and is widely regarded as a seminal piece of queer cinema. Rich has also stated that "[d]ocumentary has been the dominant medium for the New Trans Cinema" (Rich 274). Subsequently, *Mosaic*, a recent, trans-made documentary, was selected in order to include an example of trans-made documentary film and to highlight the work of two Canadian, transgender filmmakers: Markus "Star" Harwood-Jones and co-director Shane Camastro. Lastly, *Her Story*, released through YouTube, examples the utility of social media platforms for the distribution of alternative, transgender media. As previously stated, each of these texts were made by a transgender director and feature transgender actors and characters at the centre of their respective narratives. Each of these projects are furthermore considered alternative media texts

---

5 LA Outfest 2001 Winner of Audience Award: Outstanding Narrative Feature, Harriet Dodge; 2001 Winners of Grand Jury Award: Outstanding Screenwriting, Silace Howard and Harriet Dodge; Paris Lesbian Film Festival 2002 Winner of Audience Award: Best Film, Silace Howard and Harriet Dodge; Philadelphia International Gay & Lesbian Film Festival 2002 Winner of Jury Prize: Best Feature - Lesbian, Silace Howard and Harriet Dodge; Seattle Lesbian & Gay Film Festival 2001 Winner of Award for Excellence: Best Female Director, Silace Howard and Harriet Dodge; 2001 Winner of Award for Excellence: Best Narrative Feature, Silace Howard and Harriet Dodge

although Jen Richards, the creator of *Her Story*, hopes her show will be picked up by a major network in the near future.

In keeping with the format established in the previous chapter, I now move to apply the rubric to the three chosen texts, opting to ask all of the questions in full one text at a time. Beginning with the earliest work *By Hook or by Crook*, I will discuss each piece in chronological order (by date of release). Thereafter, I will provide a discussion of the findings and offer a few concluding remarks on the efficacy of the rubric as a tool for cultural criticism.

**By Hook or By Crook**

Question 1: Shy and Val, the lead characters in *By Hook or By Crook,* are two complex and nuanced subjects. Both characters search for a deep sense of self and undergo significant personal development within the space of the narrative. These are two elements key to the establishment of multidimensional characters. Furthermore, transgender identity[6] is not the predominant aspect of either character. While *By Hook or By Crook* is a decidedly queer film, it also gestures to classic American renegade films such as *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Midnight Cowboy*. While both characters are openly queer and exist at the fringes of society, they move through these spaces with comfort and confidence.

---

6 While I use the term transgender to describe Shy and Val, it should be noted that they do not designate themselves as such in the context of the film. In Hook, shifts between male and female pronouns seem to coincide with context. In institutional settings like police stations or hospitals, nurses or police officers use female pronouns for both Shy and Val; by contrast, their friends use male pronouns for them as they do for each other. Furthermore, at one point in the film, Shy designates himself/themself as" both" a man and a woman. Due to the fact that the term transgender is an umbrella term which can refer to multiple gender identities such as gender fluid and genderqueer, I feel it is appropriate to use this term to describe the two characters.

In *Hook*, there is a decided contrast between social margin and centre. Due presumably to the social stigma attached to transgender identity, Shy and Val are unable to find steady, legal employment and are forced to engage in petty crime to make ends meet. The contrast between marginalized subject and social centre is perhaps most palpable when Shy and Val encounter regulatory institutions such as the police and the healthcare system. However, as in the great American cowboy tradition, these two characters are able to forge a path of survival. Importantly, their position as outcasts or 'others' does not preclude them from creating a queer life worth living.

Question 2: Shy first encounters Val under attack by an unknown assailant while wandering the back alleys of "the big city". Shy's intervention in Val's assault is the catalyst that sparks their friendship. For Val, the violence he encounters is primarily a consequence of transphobia. In *Hook*, violence befalls Val when he encounters the arm of various regulatory institutions such as the police and the healthcare system. Significantly, in the film these two institutions work together to enact violence upon Val. After being arrested for vehicle theft, the police determine that Val is mentally unstable and place him in a psychiatric facility. Therein Val is kept under close surveillance and seems to grow physically ill during his stay. The healthcare system presents a particular challenge to Val. As an institution, the healthcare system has historically pathologized transgender identity. One may draw a parallel between Val's involuntary imprisonment in the psychiatric facility with Lile Elbe's near capture and imprisonment by a doctor who wrongly labels her transgender identity as schizophrenia in *The Danish Girl*. Ultimately, Val is not doomed to spend his life condemned to an institution; Shy rescues his

friend from the mental health facility and they continue their journey to find Val's birth mother. Thus, institutional violence is not an insurmountable burden in the film.

Question 3: Since Hook's initial release in 2001, discourses within LGBT communities regarding gender identity have expanded considerably. While one may-due to the frequent switching in the film between male and female pronouns-find it apt to label Shy and Val as genderqueer or genderfluid subjects, the fact that these terms are one, not employed in the film and two, were not widely used at the time of the film's production leads me to think otherwise. Alternatively, one could posit that Shy and Val's frequent switching between pronouns results from the need to conceal their transgender identities in order to ensure their safety in certain spaces. Presumably, the directorial decision to show Shy and Val switching pronouns between various queer and non-queer spaces was made in order to illustrate the challenges transgender people face trying to survive while living in a predominantly heteronormative society.

Question 4: Shy and Val are played by co-directors Silas Howard and Harry Dodge. Both identify as transgender men and have worked on a variety of projects collaboratively and independently that focus on queer subjects. As Ruby B. Rich wrote in reference to *Hook*, "[w]hen the baton passes from outsider to insider, the terms of cinematic enunciation change abruptly" (Rich 273). More specifically, Rich asserts that, unlike cinema focused on transgender characters made by non-transgender people, films such as *Hook*, made by and for trans people, do not feature a "voyeuristic gaze" or "interest in any act of transformation whatsoever" (Rich 274). Moreover, Rich writes, the costars "embody references to their own extrafilmic pasts" living among San Francisco's queer communities which "enriches" the film "with a cultural lineage that’s been remapped onto retooled genderqueer coordinates" (Rich 274). As prevalent

member's of San Francisco's historic queer community, the two filmmakers create a queer/trans media text imbued with the authoritative perspective that can perhaps only come from lived experience.

**Mosaic**

Question 1: *Mosaic* is a long-format documentary that focuses exclusively on director Markus Harwood-Jones's travels across Canada and the United States. The film is composed primarily of Markus's interviews with transgender folks from all walks of life. In the interviews, Markus asks participants to discuss their experiences grappling with gender, coming out to friends and family, what community means to them, and more. While Markus's foremost interest in the film is transgender identity, the experience of being transgender is discussed with a high level of nuance that prevents transgender identity from becoming tokenized or fetishized within the space of the film. *Mosaic* is clearly a media text made by and for transgender people which seeks to provide a significant resource for transgender narratology.

Question 2: Many participants within *Mosaic* discuss experiences of both covert and overt transphobic violence. Since these narratives of violence are communicated through oral storytelling instead of visualized representations, they do not feel gratuitous in nature. Stories of violence are told in the documentary because they are both authentic and serve to educate the film's audience about the (at times) difficult reality transgender people face. While many of Markus's interview subjects have experienced violence, their survival is testimony to their resilience. These are surely stories of strength and fortitude rather than victimhood.

Question 3: Gender is discussed at length in *Mosaic*. Each interview subject is given an opportunity to discuss their interpretation of and experiences with gender. These stories are highly diverse and illustrate the heterogeneous nature of gender identity within transgender communities. Many participants speak to the negative consequences of gender binary logic and heteronormativity decrying the erroneous requirements of traditional gender roles. Additionally, many participants give detailed descriptions of transgender identity producing an archive of diverse trans identity knowledge for the film's audience. Moreover, at multiple times throughout the documentary, Markus's interview subjects describe the importance of sharing stories of transgender identity and experience as a tool for transgender self-discovery. Undoubtedly, part of the film's purpose is to highlight diverse transgender identities in order to serve as a resource of self-exploration for transgender people.

Question 4: Unique in all six films discussed in this thesis, *Mosaic* is the only media text which exclusively features transgender subjects. The documentary, which is also directed by a transgender man, boasts an all-transgender editing team as well as a soundtrack made entirely by transgender artists. As described on the distribution company website, "*Mosaic* is more than a film, or even an ethnography, it is a practice in directly supporting trans individuals and their communities" (starkisscreations.com).

**Her Story**

Question 1: Ally, a cisgender lesbian and Lila, a bisexual transwoman, are *Her Story's* two protagonists. Both Ally and Lila have multiple interests, desires and fears. Lila is a recovering addict who works at a bar. She is in an abusive relationship with a cisgender man but

feels increasingly compelled to start dating Ally after the two meet. Lila's transgender identity is an important aspect of her character's backstory, though it is not her predominant characteristic. Furthermore, Lila does not stand alone as the only transgender character in the show. Lila's close friend and sponsor Paige is a transwoman and a highly successful attorney whose romantic and professional life are the subject of one of the show's subplots. All in all, Lila and Paige are decidedly multidimensional characters.

Question 2: Lila's toxic relationship with her boyfriend is the main site of violence within the show. From the first episode onwards, Lila's partner grows increasingly possessive and controlling. Through the dialogue that occurs during their fights, the audience is clued in to Lila's financial dependence upon her boyfriend, a fact that further illustrates the clear power imbalance in their relationship. The verbal fights eventually escalate into physical assault and Ally intervenes to find Lila safe housing. Luckily, Lila is able to leave her abusive relationship and begins a loving and nurturing relationship with Ally at the season's close. Importantly, the abusive relationship does not reach a deadly climax and Lila is able to remove herself from the highly precarious situation. Such relationships are no doubt a harsh reality for many women. It is, subsequently, an empowering narrative for the audience to witness as Lila leaves her boyfriend, secures her personal safety and begins a new, positive relationship. Ultimately, writer Jen Richards is able to depict violence in *Her Story* without making transgender lives appear unlivable. Perhaps even more important, Richards presents her audience with trans characters who possess the agency to bring violence against them to an end.

Question 3: Ally's friend group (primarily made up of white, cisgender lesbians) are divided in their acceptance of transgender people into the queer community. Some of her friends

openly and passionately discuss their aversion to transwomen and mock Ally when she reveals that she is developing romantic feelings for Lila. One of her friends even goes so far as to refer to Lila as a "tranny" and refuses to use her correct female pronouns. Another of Ally's friends argues that if Ally were to date a transgender woman, she would no longer be able to call herself a lesbian (due to the assumption that Lila, and all transwomen, are in fact men in disguise). The discriminatory attitudes within Ally's friend group are reflective of very real facets of the lesbian community which reject transgender people outright and rely upon biological determinism to interpret gender. Ally's friends attempt to act as gatekeepers of both lesbianism and womanhood by refusing to accept Lila, and other transgender women, as women. The most outspoken of Ally's friends eventually outs Paige in an op-ed piece which causes Paige untold difficulties in her legal career and burgeoning romantic relationship. Angelica Ross, who plays Paige, has expressed that these politically charged scenes reflect "many of the experiences and conversations Jen and I had while living together in Chicago" (Brighe 2016). These conversations demonstrate the misconceptions and prejudices transgender people face even within the queer communities they helped to establish[7].

Apart from the transphobic attitudes present within Ally's friend group, transgender identity, on the whole, is treated with respect in *Her Story*. While it is clear that within the web series, as in real life, transgender people have yet to be fully accepted and integrated into society, Lila's character is highly relatable to both transgender and non-transgender audiences alike. Despite experiencing instances of transphobia from other characters within the show, Lila's transgender identity is neither tokenized nor fetishized by the web series. While Lila's cisgender

---

7 see Stein and Thomson 2004, Gan 2007, Hammond 2015

audience (myself included therein) will not be able to empathize with her experiences of transphobia, they may nonetheless still root for her character's success. This is precisely because Richards has written a transgender character whose identity is not fetishized or villainized within the show's gaze. The web series artfully depicts the difficulties transgender women face in contemporary society without alienating them from their audience or making them appear as unrelatable.

Question 4: As cultural critique Mari Brighe wrote in The Advocate, *Her Story* "is rich with the authentic, diverse experiences of trans people in a way that few other trans narratives have been" (Brighe 2016). Brighe, quoting Ross, links that authenticity to the writing of co-creator Jen Richards: "Up until this point, most portrayals of trans stories have been from the outside in. *Her Story* gives audiences a fresh perspective from the inside out" (Brighe 2016). As previously stated, the story lines depicted in *Her Story* are largely based upon the real-life experiences of Ross and Richards, the two transgender women responsible for the show's creation. As in *Hook*, *Her Story* possesses the authoritative perspective that can perhaps only be found in representation made by and for transgender people.

**Comparative Analysis and Concluding Remarks**

In comparison to their mainstream media counterparts examined in Chapter 3, the transgender cultural texts examined in this chapter were far less problematic. The fact that these texts were universally made by transgender people is perhaps evidence that content which features marginalized communities and marginalized social subjects made by members of the social demographic in question are less likely to be problematic. While non-transgender subjects

are certainly capable of producing inclusive, non-problematic transgender representation in media, it seems from the popular, cis-made trans-stories examined in the previous chapter, that an outsider perspective is likely to yield at best questionable transgender stories and at worst defamatory misrepresentation.

In comparison to one another, the texts in this chapter hold a few salient features in common. First, in none of the texts discussed are transgender characters subjected to scrutinizing analysis of their bodies. Unlike the voyeuristic scenes in *The Danish Girl* and *Boys Don't Cry*, transgender bodies in these alternative texts are never exposed and fetishized in a dramatic moment of reveal. Second, the primary conflict or drama within the texts is not engineered through the establishment of one transgender subject made to navigate an intense environment of heteronormativity. While characters are forced to grapple with transphobia in *Her Story* and *Mosaic* and in *By Hook or By Crook*, the dichotomy between society and transgender individual is not as extreme as in *Dallas Buyers Club* or *Boys Don't Cry*. Instead, problems faced by transgender characters are much more nuanced. In *Her Story* Lila grapples with an abusive partner and struggles to embrace her queer sexuality. In *By Hook or By Crook* Shy mourns the loss of his father and attempts to establish himself in a new city. In *Mosaic* Markus investigates transgender experiences of gender, community and queer identity while travelling as a homeless youth.

Third, in each film examined in this chapter, transgender identity is not made into an aberrant identity as it is in their mainstream counterparts. While many of the characters found in these three media texts experience social ostracism due to transphobia, they also have access to queer communities. These communities, sometimes small as is *Hook*, or expansive as in *Mosaic*,

offer both economic and social support as well as providing a space in which the transgender subjects experience belonging. In each of these three films, the presence of queer spaces serve as sites in which transgender identity is not aberrant, simply normal. This, by comparison, is not the case in the mainstream films examined in Chapter 3. While Brandon and Lile do not have the protection and affirmation that comes with queer community, the narratives of Lila, Shy, Val and Markus show them as either becoming integrated into, or as already well established in queer and trans communities.

Finally, when issues related to transphobia, anti-transgender violence, or economic precarity are examined or depicted in each text, their inclusion therein is never gratuitous. Instead, these difficult though poignant themes are explored in order to give voice to the lived realities of many transgender people which, unfortunately, too-often include multiple forms of violence. Importantly, while in the mainstream films examined, each transgender character dies within the space of the narrative, in *By Hook or By Crook*, *Her Story* and *Mosaic*, each transgender character experiences adversity and survives. In the alternative texts, adversity experienced by transgender characters serves as a catalyst for personal development. Effectively, experiences of transphobia or anti-transgender violence ultimately demonstrate the resilience of the transgender characters depicted.

Overall, the rubric proved to be an efficient tool for assessing transgender representation in alternative media. While, in the previous chapter the, rubric assisted in diagnosing biases in the writing, acting and directing of transgender characters, in this chapter, the rubric was able to assess the conditions for more empowering transgender representation. Of particular interest in this chapter was the finding that experiences of marginalization or transphobia must not be

altogether avoided in order for a media text to provide empowered representations of trans subjects. When transgender characters are depicted as possessing the agency necessary to overcome adversity, it communicates a clear message of empowerment to the audience of a given media text.

Critically, although the rubric was initially designed to serve as a tool for investigating the production of harmful stereotypes in media, it has also served as a means for understanding the production of positive representation. As stated in the previous chapter, my hope in developing this rubric is that it will serve as a tool, not only for those who wish to assess transgender representation in media, but those who seek to write, direct or produce transgender subjects who resist stereotypes across various media.

# Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to put forth a practical rubric which would guide its user's analysis of transgender visibility across a variety of media spaces. The rubric aimed to offer a means of understanding some of the more salient conditions necessary to the production of empowering transgender representation. At the same time, the rubric was able to point out prevalent stereotypes found in representations of transgender folks, particularly those instances of representation curated by non-transgender media makers. These stereotypes, found all too frequently in media representations of transgender people, reflect antiquated understandings of transgender identity. Consequently, it is necessary to uproot and discard transgender stereotypes in order to move toward more empowering forms of transgender visibility and representation.

To this effect, the rubric successfully identified not only stereotypical representations of transgender people, but additionally revealed some of the conditions necessary to creating empowering transgender visibility. The rubric's four primary concerns were tokenization, violence, the communication of gender knowledges, and cisgender participation in the production of narratives focused upon transgender people and transgender experiences. Through the analysis of six media texts, the rubric demonstrated its efficacy as a tool for identifying problematic representations as well as its ability to assist in the development of nuanced critical evaluations of both problematic and empowering transgender representation.

Importantly, the rubric did not set strict guidelines for what does or does not constitute empowering representation. Instead, the rubric asks its user to consider the implications of what was/is being represented to them about transgender people. For example, it is not necessary that transgender characters never experience violence (both overt and/or covert) in the space of a

narrative. In some of the media texts studied, the presence of violence worked to rob transgender characters of agency and produced gratuitous scenes of abject suffering. In other instances, violence served as a catalyst for character development-a hurdle for a transgender character to face and overcome. Summarily, the rubric should be regarded as an analytical tool rather than a totalizing set of guidelines for the representation of transgender people in media.

While much queer visibility theory has focused on the cultural implications and sociological impact of various forms of queer visibility, little research has sought, outright, to develop methodology for the way we, as cultural critics, interpret transgender visibility. My intention in developing the rubric was to take up the most salient criticisms regarding trans visibility from transgender studies scholars and transgender activists and concentrate these concerns into a practical, analytical tool. Once published, I hope the rubric will be used by both transgender studies scholars and those cultural critics and producers who operate outside of the academy. It is also my hope that others, particularly transgender cultural critics, will alter or add to the rubric over time; making it more effective and adapting it to the ever-changing landscape of transgender visibility across various media.

In order to further develop the rubric as a tool for representational analysis, it must be applied to different forms of transgender media visibility. One possible area of media representation that the rubric could be applied to in future research is that of transgender visibility in the news. Transgender issues have become a hot button topic for journalists in recent years. Celebrities such as Laverne Cox, Jazz Jennings and Caitlyn Jenner have received a fair amount of press attention and have all spoken publicly about transgender identity and various issues of concern within transgender communities. In the early months of 2018, President

Donald Trump's decision to instate a national ban on transgender people enlisting in the U.S. military was met with heated backlash and debate. In September of 2017, Trump's Education Department announced plans to overturn Obama-era legislation protecting transgender students from various forms of discrimination in their schools. In June of last year, the United States also saw the first election of a transgender person to a state seat in national history. All of these events have received widespread news attentions. Conversely, certain transgender issues have yet to receive adequate attention from news outlets. Murders of transgender people, a phenomena that tragically appears to be on the rise, rarely receive coverage by mainstream news outlets (Astor 2017). Further research upon the differing treatment of transgender people, celebrities and otherwise, across diverse news channels is needed. This is but one area of trans media visibility in which the rubric could be utilized.

As is the case with any analytic tool, the rubric alone cannot shift cultural discourse on transgender identity. While the rubric greatly assisted in guiding my analysis of various instances of transgender visibility, my critiques were bolstered by extensive research into queer visibility and representation theory. Although chapters three and four referred to only a small amount of research, my insights and analysis in these sections are directly informed by my background as a researcher in this field. Consequently, it is unclear how effectively the rubric would work in the hands of a cultural critique who is not versed in the field of transgender studies. Moreover, while I have spent a significant period of time immersing myself in this discipline, my position as a cisgender researcher has doubtlessly precluded me from delivering the same level of insight on transgender representation as that of a transgender cultural critic. It is certainly necessary that

more transgender cultural critics secure opportunities to voice their opinions upon the history and future directions of transgender visibility in media.

The task of interrogating and dismantling stereotypes must be tackled on multiple fronts. As Stuart Hall has argued, often that which is represented in media is a reflection of pre-existing logics that serves to reinforce the supposed normalcy of social hierarchies and the assumed reality of particular characteristics being endemic to various social groups. Stereotypes found in media not only reflect biased notions about marginalized groups such as transgender people but actually serve to reify and direct bias in society. If we are to accept both that stereotypes "fix" meaning (following Hall) and that the media both reflects and informs popular knowledge, then it follows that the interrogation of stereotypes found in media by academics and cultural critics would not be enough to undo the power of those stereotypes, though this work is still necessary. Rather, a cultural shift that will not only do away with stereotyping but make a significant effort to adapt to the reality that our population and its culture is fundamentally heterogenous will require massive alterations to how knowledges are made and communicated through the various institutions that guide our society.

For transgender people, an increase of positive representation in media will no doubt aid in changing public opinions on transgender identity. However, as Hall argues

> "If you want to begin to *change* the relationship of the viewer to the image, you have to intervene in exactly that powerful exchange between the image and its psychic meaning, the depths of the fantasy, the collective and social fantasies with which we invest images, in order to, as it were, expose and deconstruct the work of representation which the stereotypes are doing " (Hall 21).

How then does one make interventions into the conduits of power found between the image and its meaning? Whose responsibility is it to make such an intervention? And how do we intervene in the exchange of power without simply redirecting it to suit our own desires, political and otherwise? In developing and putting forth this rubric, I hope it will serve, in some small measure, toward finding the answers to these questions and more.

## Works Cited


"14 Cisgender Actors in Transgender Roles". *The Hollywood Reporter*. 5 May 2017, www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/cisgender-actors-transgender-roles-elle-fanning-eddie-redmayne-more-998984. Accessed 9 May 2018.

"Addressing Anti-Transgender Violence: Exploring Realities, Challenges and Solutions." *The Human Rights Campaign and the Trans People of Colour Coalition*, Nov, 2015. www.hrc.org/resources/addressing-anti-transgender-violence-exploring-realities-challenges-and-sol. Accessed 8 May 2018.

Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2010.

Astor, Maggie. "Violence Against Transgender People is on the Rise, Advocates Say." *The New York Times*, 9 Nov. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/11/09/us/transgender-women-killed.html. Accessed 10 April 2018.

Boyd, Nan Alamilla. "Shopping for Rights: Gays, Lesbians, and Visibility Politics." *Denver University Law Review*, vol. 75, no. 4, 1998, pp. 1361.

*Boys Don't Cry*. Directed by Kimberly Peirce, performances by Hilary Swank, Chloë Sevigny, and Peter Sarsgaard, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 1999.

Brighe, Mari. "The Emmy-Nominated Trans Web Series Her Story Could Change Everything." *The Advocate*, 31 July, 2016, https://www.advocate.com/transgender/2016/7/31/emmy-nominated-trans-web-series-her-story-could-change-everything. Accessed 8 May 2018.

Bronski, Michael. *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sexuality*. Boston, South End Publishing, 1984.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York, Routledge, 1993.

*By Hook or By Crook*. Directed by Harry Dodge and Silas Howard, performances by Harry Dodge and Silas Howard, Steakhaus Productions, 2001.

Carter, Julian B., David J. Getsy, and Trish Salah. "introduction." *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 4, 2014, pp. 469-481.

Cavalcante, Andre. "Breaking into Transgender Life: Transgender Audiences' Experiences with "First of its Kind" Visibility in Popular Media: Transgender Breakout Texts."*Communication, Culture & Critique*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2017, pp. 538-555.

Chasin, Alexandra. *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market*. New York, St. Martin's Press, 2000.

Ciasullo, Ann M. "Making Her (in)Visible: Cultural Representations of Lesbianism and the Lesbian Body in the 1990s." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2001, pp. 577-608.

Clark, Danae. “Commodity Lesbianism.” *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, edited by Abelove, Henry, Michèle A. Barale, and David M. Halperin, Routledge, 1993, pp. 186.

Compton, D’Lane, and Tristan Bridges. "Callmecaitlyn and Contemporary Trans Visibility." *Contexts*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2016, pp. 84.

Connell, Raewyn. “Transsexual Women and Feminist Thought: Toward New Understanding and New Politics.” *Signs*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2012, pp. 857–881.

Coulthard, Glen. “Subjects of Empire: Indigenous Peoples and the ‘Politics of Recognition’ in Canada.” *Journal of Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2007, pp. 437-460.

*Dallas Buyers Club*. Directed by Jean-Marc Vallée, performances by Matthew McConaughey and Jared Leto, Focus Features, 2013.

*The Danish Girl*. Directed by Tom Hooper, performances by Eddie Redmayne and Alicia Vikander, Universal Pictures, 2015.

Dame, Avery P. "Mapping the Territory: Archiving the Trans Website in an Age of Search." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 3-4, 2016, pp. 628-636.

David, Emmanuel. "Capital T: Trans Visibility, Corporate Capitalism, and Commodity Culture." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2017, pp. 28-44.

Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo.* 1966. Taylor & Francis e-library, 2003.

Dresden, Hilton. “#KindComments Creator Jacob Tobia Celebrates Trans Visibility with Instagram and GLAAD.” *Out*, 31 March, 2017, www.out.com/interviews/2017/3/31/kindcomments-creator-jacob-tobia-celebrates-trans-visibility-instagram-glaad21 March 2017. Accessed 16 October 2017.

Dunks, Glenn. “Review: ‘The Danish Girl’ Might Have Been Okay Ten Years Ago, But It’s Terrible Today.” Junkee, 28 Jan. 2016, www.junkee.com/review-the-danish-girl-might-have-been-okay-ten-years-ago-but-its-terrible-today/72638. Accessed 8 May 2018.

Feder, Sam, and Alexandra Juhasz. "Does Visibility Equal Progress?: A Conversation between Sam Feder and Alexandra Juhasz on Trans Activist Media." *Jump Cut*, VOLUME no. 57, 2016, pp. Web.

Fink, Marty, and Quinn Miller. "Trans Media Moments: Tumblr, 2011–2013." *Television & New Media*, vol. 15, no. 7, 2013, pp. 611-626.

Ford, Akkadia. "The Dallas Buyers Club: Who's Buying it?" *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2017, pp. 135-140.

Framke, Caroline. "Ryan Murphy on why it's 'not an option' to cast cis actors in trans roles". Vox, 6 Jan. 2018, www.vox.com/culture/2018/1/5/16856570/pose-fx-trans-actors. Accessed 8 May 2018.

Glover, Julian K. "Redefining Realness?: On Janet Mock, Laverne Cox, TS Madison, and the Representation of Transgender Women of Color in Media." *Souls*, vol. 18, no. 2-4, 2016, pp. 338-357.

Grant, Carol. "Regressive, Reductive and Harmful: A Trans Woman's Take On Tom Hooper's Embarrassing 'Danish Girl'". Indie Wire, 3 Dec. 2015, www.indiewire.com/2015/12/regressive-reductive-and-harmful-a-trans-womans-take-on-tom-hoopers-embarrassing-danish-girl-213499. Accessed 8 May 2018.

Grant et al. "Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey." Washington, DC: *National LGBTQ Task Force*, National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2011, www.thetaskforce.org/static_html/downloads/reports/reports/ntds_full.pdfWashington. Accessed 9 May 2018.

Gross, Larry P. *Up from Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2001.

Halberstam, Judith. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York, NYU Press, 2005.

Halberstam, Judith. "The Boys Don't Cry Debate: The Transgender Gaze in Boys Don't Cry." *Screen*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2001, pp. 294.

Hall, Stuart. "Representation & the Media" *Media Education Foundation*, 1997, www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Stuart-Hall-Representation-and-the-Media-Transcript.pdf. Accessed 8 May 2018.

Hennessy, Rosemary. "Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture." *Cultural Critique*, vol. 29, no. 29, 1994, pp. 31-76.

Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York, Pantheon Books, 1988.

Heyer, Walt. “The Danish Girl is nonsense. I would know. I was once a transgender woman”. *LifeSite*, 13 Jan. 2016, www.lifesitenews.com/opinion/the-danish-girl-people-arent-born-transgender-but-playing-dress-up-can-spar. Accessed 8 May 2018.

Horak, L. "Trans on YouTube: Intimacy, Visibility, Temporality." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 4, 2014, pp. 572-585.

Hymes, Kenneth B, et al. "Kaposi's Sarcoma in Homosexual men—a Report of Eight Cases." *The Lancet*, vol. 318, no. 8247, 1981, pp. 598-600.

Juhasz, Alexandra. "Troubling Transgender Media: Fact, Fiction, and Compromise: An Introduction." *Jump Cut*, no. 57, 2016, pp. Web.

Loria, Daniel. "The 20 Year Effort to Get Dallas Buyers Club on the Screen." *Boxoffice*, vol. 149, no. 11, 2013, pp. 56.

Lovelock, Michael. “"I Am.": Caitlyn Jenner, Jazz Jennings and the Cultural Politics of Transgender Celebrity.” *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 17, no. 5, 2017, pp. 737.
McInroy, Lauren B and Craig Shelley L. “Transgender Representation in Offline and Online Media: LGBTQ Youth Perspective.” *Journal of Human Behaviour in the Social Environment*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2015, pp. 606-617.

McKay, Richard. “1970s and ‘Patient 0’ HIV-1 genomes illuminate early HIV/AIDS history in North America.” *Nature,* vol. 539, 2016, pp. 98.

Meyerowitz, Joanne. "Sex Change and the Popular Press: Historical Notes on Transsexuality in the United States, 1930-1955." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1998, pp. 159-187.

Morris, Charles E., and John M. Sloop. ""What Lips these Lips have Kissed": Refiguring the Politics of Queer Public Kissing." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2006, pp. 1-26.

Morse, Nicole E. "Seeing Double: Visibility, Alternative Temporality, and Transfeminine History in Transparent." *Jump Cut*, no. 57, 2016, pp. Web.

*Mosaic*. Directed by Marcus “Star” Harwood-Jones, independent release, distributed by Starkiss Creations, 2014.

"Mosaic." *Starkiss Creations*, starkisscreations.com/product/mosaic/. Accessed 10 May 2018.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen,* vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6-18.

Namaste, Viviane K. *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People.* Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Nappier, Abigail, Robert Harrison, and Ann Veeck. "Unpacking 'gay Vague' Advertising: The Case Of Lesbian Chic." *American Academy of Advertising*, 2015, pp. 94.

Nelson, Maggie. *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*. New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 2011.

Ng, Eve. "A "Post−Gay" Era? Media Gaystreaming, Homonormativity, and the Politics of LGBT Integration." *Communication, Culture & Critique*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2013, pp. 258-283.

Opam, Kwame. "Casting cis actors in trans roles has reached its breaking point". The Verge, 20 Sep. 2016. www.theverge.com/2016/9/20/12983104/trans-actors-hollywood-representation-jeffrey-tambor-emmys-speech. Accessed 8 May 2018.

Panayotov, Stanimir. "Straight Separatism: Ten Theses on the Queer Archive." *InterAlia*, no. 11a, 2016, pp. 122-124.

Phelan, Shane. "The Shape of Queer: Assimilation and Articulation." Women & Politics, vol. 18, no. 2, 1997, pp. 55-73.

Pidduck, Julianne. "The Boys Don't Cry Debate: Risk and Queer Spectatorship." *Screen*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2001, pp. 97.

Puar, Jasbir K. "Transnational Configurations of Desire: The Nation and its White Closets." *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, edited by Brander Rasmussen, Birgit, Duke University Press, 2001, pp. 167-183.

Raun, Tobias. "Archiving the Wonders of Testosterone Via YouTube." *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 4, 2015, pp. 701-709.

Rentschler, Carrie. "Expanding the Definition of Media Activism". A Companion to Media Studies. Ed. A. N. Valdivia. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007. 529-547.

Rich, B. R. *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut.* London and Durham, Duke University Press, 2013.

Richards, Jen and Zak, Laura, creators. *Her Story*. Speed of Joy Productions, 2016.

Rigney, Melissa. "Brandon Goes to Hollywood: Boys Don't Cry and the Transgender Body Film." *Film Criticism*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2003, pp. 4.

Rodríguez, Juana M. "Queer Sociality and Other Sexual Fantasies." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2011., pp. 331-348.

Serano, Julia. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity.* Emeryville, Seal Press, 2007.

Signorile, Michelangelo. "Laverne Cox Opens Up About Cisgender Actors Playing Transgender Women" *The Huffington Post*, 17 June 2017, www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/laverne-cox-cisgender-actors-trans-women_us_594518b4e4b0f15cd5bba58e. Accessed 8 May 2018.

Sikora, Tomas and Ferens, Dominika. "Introduction: Let's Talk About (Crip) Sex." *InterAlia*, no. 11a, 2016., pp. i-ix.

Smith, Victoria L. "Highways of Desolation: The Road and Trash in Boys Don't Cry and Monster." South Central Review: The Journal of the South Central Modern Language Association, vol. 32, no. 2, 2015, pp. 131.

Streeter, Thomas. "What is an advocacy group, anyway?" *Advocacy Groups and the Entertainment Industry*, edited by M. Sussman and G. Rossman, Praeger, 2000, 77-84.

Stephens, Elizabeth. "normal." Transgender Studies Quarterly, vol. 1, no. 1-2, 2014, pp. 141-145.

"These Are the Trans People Killed in 2016". *The Advocate*, 14 Oct, 2016. https://www.advocate.com/transgender/2016/10/14/these-are-trans-people-killed-2016. Accessed 16 October 2017.

Thomsen, Carly. "The Post−Raciality and Post−Spatiality of Calls for LGBTQ and Disability Visibility." Hypatia, vol. 30, no. 1, 2015, pp. 149-166.

Truitt, Jos. "The Golden Globes Gave Jared Leto an Award for Playing a Trans Woman Because Hollywood Is Terrible." *Feministing*, 13 Jan. 2014, www.feministing.com/2014/01/13/the-golden-globes-give-jared-leto-an-award-for-playing-a-trans-woman-because-hollywood-is-terrible/. Accessed 9 May 2018.

Tsai, Wan-Hsiu S. "Assimilating the Queers: Representations of Lesbians, Gay Men, Bisexual, and Transgender People in Mainstream Advertising." Advertising & Society Review, vol. 11, no. 1, 2010.

Singh, Anneliese A., Sarah E. Meng, and Anthony W. Hansen. ""I Am My Own Gender": Resilience Strategies of Trans Youth." Journal of Counseling and Development, vol. 92, no. 2, 2014, pp. 208.

Udy, Dan. "Keeping it Real: Genre and Politics on I Am Cait." *Jump Cut*, no. 57, 2016, pp. Web.

Vaid-Menon, Alok "When Representation isn't Enough: Why All of Us Aren't Proud." *Alok*, 4 June 2014, www.alokvmenon.com/blog/2014/6/4/when-representation-isnt-enough-why-all-of-us-arent-proud. Accessed 9 May 2018.

Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York, Anchor Books, 1995.

Wagner, Anthony C. "Artist Statement." *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2015, pp. 341-344.

Walker, Lisa M. "How to Recognize a Lesbian: The Cultural Politics of Looking Like what You are." *Signs*, vol. 18, no. 4, 1993, pp. 866-890.

Warner, Michael. *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life*. New York, Free Press, 1999.

Williams, Cristan. "transgender." *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 1-2, 2014, pp. 232-234.

Wright, Joe. "Only Your Calamity: The Beginnings of Activism by and for People With AIDS." *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 103, no. 10, 2013, pp. 1788–1798.