REEL GENDER: EXAMINING THE POLITICS OF TRANS IMAGES IN FILM AND MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines transgender images in film, television and media from the 1950s through the present, with an emphasis on images from the 1980s through today. The primary goal of the dissertation is to interrogate the various gender and sexual ideologies contained within the representations to determine the social status of trans people in American society. How do these images function to both encourage and stymie the liberation of transgender people in the United States? The dissertation deploys trans, queer and feminist theories to critically analyze the cultural work performed by these mass-media texts. What are the trends within the trans media canon, and how do they relate to the treatment of real-world gender-nonconforming people?

In order to answer these questions, I separate the trans images into four different stereotypes. For each of these stereotypes, I analyze three to four films to compare and contrast the way the films deal with the issues of gender and sexual variation. The first stereotype I examine is the Transgender Deceiver. The Transgender Deceiver utilizes drag and gender transformation to obtain something they want from society. While the films analyzed are comedies (Tootsie, Just One of the Guys, Sorority Boys, and Juwanna Mann), I argue that they are not as innocuous as they appear due to the way they stereotype gender-variant people as duplicitous, selfish and conniving.

Next, I examine the trope of the Transgender Mammy. Through turning my analytical lens on To Wong Foo, Holiday Heart and Flawless, I look at the stereotype of
the fabulous, servile and palatable trans-feminine subject. In these films, the characters exist to fix the problems of gender-normative people, add color and spice to their broken lives, and become worthy through their devoted service to the hegemonic class.

The Transgender Monster describes the use of gender-transgressive killers in horror and slasher films. While films such as *Psycho* and *Silence of the Lambs* are more well-known for this disturbing representation, I examine three teen horror “B-Movies” to examine this trend: *Terror Train, Sleepaway Camp* and *Cherry Falls*. While trans people are frequently murdered in vicious hate crimes, these films perform a reversal of reality by presenting transgender folks as killers. By doing so, they cement fear of gender variance and perpetuate the continued demonization of transgender women.

I end the dissertation by examining the Transgender Revolutionary. I look at four documentaries (*Fenced Out, Toilet Training, Cruel and Unusual, and Screaming Queens*) to demonstrate how this “new wave” of documentary film diverges from traditional representations of transpeople in documentaries by focusing on trans political agency.

The final chapter summarizes the findings of the dissertation, explores theoretical tensions in the work and contemplates new directions for transgender media. I assert new paradigms for gender and sexuality through a discussion of “degendering.” Media can play a powerful role in documenting the emergence of exciting new transformations in the ongoing movement for gender freedom.
This dissertation is dedicated to all transgender activists, past and present that have fought against oppression, injustice and intolerance. I thank you for your contributions to the building of a radically different world. This is a fight that’s worth it, and this is a fight we will win.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE. FROM THE REEL TO THE REAL: FRAMING TRANSGENDERISM</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ON SCREEN</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming a Trans Media Critic</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background and History</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Trans Media Archives</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributions of Study</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening the Theoretical Toolbox</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmodernism and Media Culture</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Location</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Activist Scholar</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Codes and Master Texts</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bogle and Russo</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of Study</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Breakdowns</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One Endnotes</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO. TRANSGENDER DECEIVERS: BEING WHAT YOU ARE NOT TO GET WHAT YOU WANT</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tootsie</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just One of the Guys</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans Monsters Raging Against the System?</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding Thoughts</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four Endnotes</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FIVE. TRANSGENDER REVOLUTIONARIES: TRANS POLITICAL AGENCY AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN A “NEW WAVE” OF DOCUMENTARY FILM</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Trans Documentaries and their Common Features</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Fenced Out</em></td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bathroom Politics and the Activist Training Film <em>Toilet Training</em></td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans Women in Prison</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ending in the Past</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Victims to Revolutionaries</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five Endnotes</td>
<td>294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER SIX. TRANS MEDIA FUTURES: ACTIVISM, GENDER MULTIPLICITY AND HUMAN LIBERATION</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Studies Tensions</td>
<td>304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer Theory and Socio-Cultural Transformation</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics and a Progressive Reading of Gender and Sexuality</td>
<td>309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Genderism to Gender Multiplicity</td>
<td>311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing Media Technologies and Transgender Agency</td>
<td>316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Liberation and Degendering</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Six Endnotes</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE:
FROM THE REEL TO THE REAL: FRAMING TRANSGENDERISM ON SCREEN

Becoming a Trans Media Critic

I can remember it like it was yesterday. In 1983, I sat transfixed on a Saturday evening watching *Solid Gold*, the popular weekly television show. *Solid Gold*, hosted by the glamorous Marilyn McCoo, featured top pop artists from 1980-1988. On this particular evening, I listened intently to the lyrics of a song I had never heard before. “Give me time, to realize my crime. Let me love and steal.” Although I liked the melancholy sound of the tune, I was most intrigued by the person singing it. Dressed in a long cape-like dress with multiple multicultural patterns drawn on it, and wearing a black bowler hat with long cascading braids, I immediately felt a connection with this person who I later learned was named Boy George and was the lead vocalist for the UK band Culture Club. The song “Do You Really Want to Hurt Me?” was the band’s first single from their amazing album “Kissing to Be Clever.” Boy George was the first gender-variant person I ever saw in media culture. Although I did not have the language to explain the connection, in some fundamental way I knew: This person is *like me*.

Although Boy George was my first exposure to gender diversity on the small screen, he was far from the last. As I grew into my early teens, I began to watch television talk shows like *The Phil Donahue Show*. On at 4:00 p.m. after my mother had watched her afternoon soap operas, Donahue tackled the sensitive and controversial issues of the day, including homosexuality, cross-dressing and transsexualism. For the first time, I saw transvestites, drag queens, female impersonators and transsexuals on television talk about their own lives and their own unique transitions and gender
journeys. Donahue had many imitators, including Sally Jesse Raphael, Geraldo Rivera, Maury Povich and Jerry Springer. Gender variance became a veritable staple on these shows, and was frequently trotted out during Sweeps Week. Although I now see many of these images as incredibly problematic and exploitative, at the time I did not think in such critical terms. I was simply so thrilled to see images of people who were professing feelings that I secretly harbored in myself.

As a freshman at the University of New Hampshire, I slowly began to creep open the closet door. I told friends and family that I was a transsexual, and received decidedly mixed responses. I declared a women’s studies major and became a transgender activist. My life became consumed both with researching transgender phenomena and fighting for transgender civil rights. Although I had been a film and television buff for most of my life, I did not put my interest in transgender issues and media together until working on my MA degree at the University of Northern Iowa. That thesis project, entitled “Sickos, Psychos and Sluts: Images of Transgendered Women in Media Culture” began a long trajectory of thinking about mass mediated images of transgenderism that continues through this project and beyond.

My work in feminism had taught me how to critique gender and sexuality and to become more conscious of patriarchy. In addition, my work as a queer/trans activist had taught me about the importance of speaking out, grass-roots organizing and radical social change. During my time as an activist, I learned of the then-popular militant activist organizations Queer Nation, Act-Up and The Lesbian Avengers. Through merging feminist theory/gender studies and lessons learned as an activist, I patched together a critical framework to bring to bear on media images. Specifically, this framework
includes elements of postmodernism and cultural studies that allow me to critically interrogate images for the ways in which they reproduce hierarchies based on race, class, gender and sexuality.

In addition, my training in women’s studies taught me about the importance of intersectionality. Through reading women of color scholars like bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, Barbara Smith, Patricia Hill-Collins and Audre Lorde, I came to see the importance of placing gender/sexuality in proximity with other types of difference, including race, class, disability and age. Through reading feminist classics like This Bridge Called My Back edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga and Audre Lorde’s collection of essays Sister Outsider, I came to understand the flaws and limitations of feminism and women’s studies, which often centered the experiences of white, middle-class, able-bodied women. bell hook’s notion of white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy (Carter) was also immensely helpful to understand the interlocking systems of domination that plague United States culture.

While working on the MA thesis, I quickly learned that I was not interested in analyzing media images just for the sake of analyzing them. In fact, the apparatus of film and the formal elements of media held little interest to me. I do not see myself per se as a media studies scholar. Rather, I am a women’s studies and cultural studies scholar who utilizes media as a window to look at American society. Thus, in terms of theory my work is centrally concerned with cultural politics and not formal filmic critique. I would now like to introduce the basic elements of the current project.

My dissertation project examines representations of gender variance and transgender identities in film and television. While the project includes mention of media
representations from the 1960s and 1970s (such as Glen or Glenda, Psycho and All in the Family), the bulk of analyses will be devoted to films and TV programs from the 1980s through the present. The dissertation is an interdisciplinary project that examines the varied transgender images found in multiple media and filmic genres, including daytime talk shows, television situation comedies, narrative film comedies, “slasher” horror movies, documentaries and reality television. These trans media images do not emerge from a cultural vacuum. Rather, they emerge from and into a cultural framework with specific ideologies regarding gender and sexuality. The guiding question which connects these analyses is the following: what is the cultural work performed by these images, or more specifically, how do images of gender diversity both promote and counter the tenets of the trans liberation movement? Using insights from feminist, anti-racist, queer and trans theory and praxis, I endeavor to critically and politically engage with mass-mediated and independently produced images of trans people in order to untangle their complicated relationship to cultural attitudes. The dissertation will argue that in addition to promulgating transphobic ideology, these representations function to create and recreate gendered subjectivities and sometimes proffer glimpses of subversive potential.

Sex, gender and sexual orientation in the United States are social categorizations that exert tremendous control over individuals and groups. Individuals who stray from heterosexuality or traditional gender roles face social penalties and institutionalized discrimination. The transgender liberation movement seeks to promote freedom of gender expression and the eradication of transphobic prejudice and discrimination. Given the incredible power of the media, images of transgender people can exert an effect on the acceptance of non-traditional gender identities and can function to counter
transphobic bigotry. However, the media is a double-edged sword, and thus it can conversely function to reinscribe prejudice. The advent of the autonomous transgender movement in the 1990s has impacted the ways in which trans people are represented in mainstream and alternative media productions. This study will chart the varied images of transgenderism in film and television in the past several decades and theorize their tenuous relationship to transgender political movement in the U.S. While simplistic notions of “positive” and “negative” images will be avoided, perspectives from queer and trans theory, feminism and cultural studies will be deployed to critically analyze representations for the ways in which they both challenge and perpetuate status quo, hegemonic ideologies of gender, sexuality, race and class.

Background and History: Trans Communities and Trans Media

The hegemonic paradigm of sex, gender and sexual orientation in the U.S. is often misogynistic, heterosexist and transphobic. These various forms of patriarchal domination function to oppress women, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals, and reinforce male, heterosexual and gender-normative privilege. Many filmic and televisual programs work to reinforce these dominant attitudes and perpetuate status quo notions of gender, sexuality, race, and other social categories. However, they also can frequently serve to dislodge these very ideologies and provoke viewers to re-examine their core assumptions regarding sex, gender and sexual orientation. The effects of media are polysemic and notoriously unpredictable. In addition, because this study focuses on the media texts themselves and not on reception, I do not purport to quantitatively or qualitatively measure the impact of specific media texts on individuals or groups. However, I will endeavor to analyze the shift in trans images over time and
place them in relation to the burgeoning movement for transgender civil rights and liberation.

Transgender refers to individuals who feel that the gender assigned to them at birth (usually based upon a cursory examination of their genitalia by the attending physician) is a false or incomplete description of who they are. Transgender people *dis-identify*, in varying degree, with their initial sex/gender designation (Muñoz). While many assume that the exclamation “It’s a boy!” or “It’s a girl!” upon a child’s birth is a benign descriptive act, in actuality it is an insidious *prescriptive* act which places a child on a gender track for the duration of their lives. While it is also widely assumed that the presence or absence of a penis is a reliable indicator of a person’s gender identity, the very presence of widespread sex and gender diversity in the human population³ refutes such a sentiment. Growing up, many pre- or proto-transgender young people realize that there is a dissonance between their internal sense of self (core gender identity) and the social gender role to which they have been arbitrarily assigned. At some point during their life span, they may choose to “come out” as trans and begin outwardly manifesting a gender expression that does not “match” their assigned birth sex. This alternative gender expression can range from rarely wearing clothing associated with the “opposite” sex to hormonally and surgically altering one’s body to be completely congruent with one’s gender identity.⁴

The term “transgender” originates from Dr. Virginia Prince,⁵ who coined the term “transgenderist” to refer to an individual who lives full time in accordance with their preferred gender role but does not want or need sex reassignment surgery (SRS) to manage their identity. Prince, a male-bodied individual who started out identifying as a
cross-dresser, coined the term “transgenderist” when s/he decided to live full-time as a woman but wanted an intermediary term between the twin poles of “transvestite” and “transsexual” (Feinberg X). In more recent parlance, “transgenderist” is not often used, but its shortened form “transgender” has arrived at frequent usage. It generally means the range of identities, expressions and behaviors that do not conform to traditional concepts of sex, gender and sexuality. Transgender is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide array of differing identity categories including cross-dressers, transsexuals, transgenderists, drag queens, drag kings, genderqueers, bi-genders, etc. For purposes of this study, I will use transgender in its broadest sense, to refer to individuals who identify on a permanent or part-time basis with a gender that differs from the one assigned to them by society at their time of birth. Transgender people may or may not physically/medically transition, they may or may not ever “come out” as trans, and they may or may not identify as “men” or as “women.” The definition of transgender, like the definition of “queer,” is flexible and inclusive. When analyzing media texts, it is often difficult to ascertain how an individual identifies: as a cross-dresser, a gender illusionist, a transsexual, as several categories simultaneously or as none at all. While transgender (or its shortened form of trans) is not a perfect solution, it is meant to be used in this study as a blanket term to cover people of varying identifications who in some way disrupt conventional scripts of sex and gender in our society. The etiology of transgender is not considered in this dissertation. Rather than focusing on what causes transgenderism, this dissertation is more interested in what causes transphobia, and how media images are related to transgender liberation and transphobic oppression.
Transphobia, the irrational fear and hatred of people who cross, blur or transcend the male/female binary, is an omnipresent force in American society. Transphobic attitudes fuel institutional discrimination, which includes employment and housing discrimination, police brutality and hate-motivated violence. As mentioned earlier, the American transgender liberation movement truly heated up in the early 1990s. Mariette Pathy Allen has been documenting the transgender community through photography since 1978. She writes:

"Since the early 1990s, I have focused on the emerging social and political transgender movement. Transgender people have always existed, but have not always been visible, unless one knew where to look. By coming to accept themselves, love each other, and appreciate the beauty of more original bodies, people with trans identities and their allies are unwilling to remain at the mercy of medical, legal, and government authorities. Today, a growing core of activists mourns at vigils for murdered transpeople, protests or testifies at trials, and lobbies for the same rights as everyone else." (8)

As Allen makes clear, the shift to a "new" movement is largely based on transpeople moving from invisibility to visibility. Historically, transgender people were expected to lie about their identities and about their pasts. The medical model of transsexuality fully expected male-to-female (MTF) transsexuals, for example, to not discuss their childhoods as "boys" or to disclose their transsexual status after surgery. In this way, the medical, psychiatric and psychological establishment encouraged transsexuals to lie about their gendered histories in order to seamlessly enter into
accordance with the hegemonic, binary gender system and live “stealth” lives. This, of course, helped to render trans subjectivity as totally invisible and as a fleeting mode of being that indicated passage from one physical state to another. In addition, transsexuals were diagnosed with “Gender Identity Disorder” (GID) by clinicians, a diagnosis found in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association. Although homosexuality was removed from the DSM beginning in 1973, both GID and Transvestic Fetishism (TF) continue to be diagnoses that pathologize gender variance. Shifts in attitudes regarding gender, coupled with grassroots political movement and unprecedented media visibility, have helped to challenge the paradigm of compulsory passing.

In the nearly two decades since 1990, political lobbyists, activists, artists and educators have worked to promote the civil rights of trans-identified persons in society. Califia writes that, “Several factors combined in the mid-nineties to produce a change in the tone of transgender activism and its agenda” (223). This included greater visibility of female-to-male (FTM) people, a refusal to “pass” or “go stealth” by MTFs and FTMs alike, and a wide-scale questioning of the medical model of transsexualism and the “Gender Identity Disorder” diagnosis in the DSM.

The way in which an oppressed group is represented in the media has an impact on the way they are treated in the “real” world. Like depictions of people of color, women, and gays and lesbians, images of trans people have been marked by sensationalism, distortion and fear-mongering. With the advent of trans liberation and the push for gender rights, images of trans people have flourished in the media and, to some extent, diversified. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD)
is one political organization that monitors media images of GLBT people in U.S. society. According to their stated mission, GLAAD is “dedicated to promoting and ensuring fair, accurate and inclusive representation of people and events in the media as a means of eliminating homophobia and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation” (www.glaad.org). GLAAD monitors film, television, radio, print and broadcast journalism, meets with producers and journalists, and drafts documents to call attention to heterosexist and transphobic media representations (www.glaad.org). However, despite these positive efforts, there still is often a dearth of images, or images that relegate trans people to a shadowy existence. My research works to uncover transphobia in filmic and televisual representations, identify the crevices where there is subversive potential, and focus on the new trans media that directly challenges gender-phobia and promotes the possibility of genuine social change. But how did we arrive at where we are today? What follows is a thumbnail sketch of trans media in the twentieth century.

**The Trans Media Archives**

**Schlock and Shock: Ed Wood’s *Glen or Glenda***

In 1953, notorious B-movie director Edward D. Wood, Jr. released a black-and-white film entitled *Glen or Glenda*. Based partially on the newspaper headlines emanating from Christine Jorgensen’s story of gender reassignment surgery in the early 1950s, the film was truly the first to take on the issue of both transvestism and transsexualism. This is the opening screen of the film:

> In the making of this film, which deals with a strange and curious subject, no punches have been pulled—no easy out has been taken. Many of the
smaller parts are portrayed by persons who actually are, in real life, the
character they portray on screen. This is a picture of stark realism—taking
no sides but giving you the facts, all the facts, as they are today.

*You are society—*

JUDGE YE NOT...

Part narrative film and part documentary, this shocking but remarkably
enlightened little gem tells the stories of two different transgender cases. The film opens
with the story of Patrick/Patricia who committed suicide after facing four arrests for the
“crime” of cross-dressing. The police officer investigating the incident goes to see a
psychiatrist specializing in gender issues to learn more information. The doctor begins
with the story of Glen/Glenda, played by Wood himself (but credited as Daniel Davis).
Glen/da is a cross-dresser coming to terms with hir\(^9\) own identity. Engaged to a beautiful
blond named Barbara, Glen/da discusses hir love of women’s clothing and hir need to
wear it on a regular basis. Glen starts cross-dressing early in life and is allowed to dress
up like a girl for Halloween. Later on, hir sister Sheila catches hir cross-dressed and Glen
is terrified from the discovery. Glen grows up, tries to purge himself of cross-dressing, but
is unable to abandon hir “transvestite desires.” Eventually s/he musters the courage to
tell hir fiancée Barbara, who states: “Glen, I don’t fully understand this. But maybe
together we can work it out.” When they go to the psychiatrist, Glenda’s existence is
explained as a result of faulty parenting. Glen needs to make wife Barbara hir substitute
Glenda, which s/he eventually accomplishes, thus eliminating the need to cross-dress.

The second case presented by the psychiatrist is that of Allen/Ann and is
described as a more “advanced case.” The word “transsexual” is not used in the film, thus
Allen, like Glen/da, is also described as a “transvestite.” Allen grows up as a gender-conflicted boy who enjoys girlish pursuits more than boyish ones. S/he enters the military but is unable to shake hir desire to dress in women’s clothing, which s/he does in secret during hir time out of uniform and away from the military environment. Once out of the service, s/he goes to visit the doctor and they diagnose Allen as a “pseudo-hermaphrodite.” They commence to give Allen hormone shots, facial plastic surgery, and eventually sex reassignment surgery. Ann then begins to live happily as a woman.

The film uses Bela Lugosi as the “puppet master” who utters obscure phrases such as “Pull the string!” Truly bizarre dream sequences are inter-cut with the narrative, including shots of a menacing devil figure. A narrator frequently intrudes into the stories of Glenda and Ann. And yet, despite these filmic annoyances (typical features of Wood’s awful directorship) there is a message of tolerance and a plea for society to wake up to the differences around them. While the etiology of transsexualism is falsely attributed to intersexual conditions and transvestism is cast as a derivative of improper parenting, the film nonetheless is daring in its subject matter and is a true touchstone in the history of transgender media images.

One can sense in the opening screen text the cultural dis-ease that Wood was confronting. The text serves as preparation for the “stark realism” which is to come, and Wood must emphasize a sort of clinical objectivity (“taking no sides,” “the facts”) in order to prepare spectators for the shock of confronting male-bodied people dressed as women on the big screen. And these screen subjects are not just donning drag for comedy or vaudeville theatre; it is an integral and immutable part of their core human identities. Wood imploring viewers to “judge ye not” is indicative of the tremendous risk
he was taking as a filmmaker (hirsself a cross-dresser) in the period of McCarthyism and ultra-square TV shows such as *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* and *Father Knows Best*. Wood dared to forward the radical notion that cross-dressers and transsexuals were human beings deserving of the same rights, liberty and respect other Americans enjoyed, quite a feat in early 1950s American culture. Wood’s achievement gives context for the many and varied transgender media images to follow.

The hapless victim of a joke, the helpful sidekick, the doomed victim, the spicy drag queen, the angry hooker, the hate crime statistic, the drugged-out Warhol superstar, and the tragic, confused soul are just a few of the stereotyped personages that fill the transgender media canon. Cross-dressing as entertainment, of course, is nothing new. It has been used for centuries in various forms of entertainment, including stage productions and vaudeville theatre. It is well known culturally that male actors played female roles in Shakespeare’s plays. In fact, cross-dressed actors can be found in many and varied cultures, such as the kabuki actors who played female roles (known as onnagata) in Japan. Drag queen and drag king performances continue to be popular in nightclubs in varied spots around the globe.

Since the advent of film in the early 20th century, and later at the beginning of television in mid-century, male performers have donned women’s clothing to elicit maximum comic effect. Charlie Chaplin, Milton Berle and Flip Wilson are but three examples of actors who frequently dressed in drag for their comic routines. One of the earliest films that involved gender transformation was 1914’s *A Florida Enchantment*, which began as a novel and was then adapted for the stage. The film version tells the story of a white woman named Lillian who visits her fiancé Fred in Florida and discovers
that he is cheating on her. She is accompanied by her African American maid Jane, who is played in the film by a white female in blackface. Lillian finds an old box in a curiosity shop and discovers seeds inside with a note explaining that these are from a “sex-change tree” in Africa. Lillian swallows one and begins a gender transformation, which causes her to flirt with her friend Bessie. She decides she needs a valet instead of a maid and forces Jane to take one herself, switching Jane into a man Jane and Lillian go to New York and return to Florida as men named Jack and Lawrence. Lawrence eventually confesses the secret of the seeds to Fred and out of curiosity he also takes a sex-change pill. After flirting with male bystanders as a woman, Fred is chased off a pier. Lillian then is shown waking up and the whole ordeal is revealed to be a dream; heteronormativity is duly restored. Although a “magical” movie, this early example of gender switching in film demonstrates the interest in the crossing of gendered boundaries and the sexual anxiety and subversion this potentially unleashes.

However, for some gender-conflicted individuals, their identities were not just magical transformations or for comedic relief. More “realistic” stories were not told for quite some time due to continuing stigma, cultural disbelief and gender/sexual oppression. One of the prime ways that early transsexuals expressed themselves was through writing their autobiographies (Conn; Martino; Hunt). The first film to give transgenderism a more serious treatment was the previously discussed Glen or Glenda. Christine Jorgensen, the most widely publicized transsexual up to that time, published her autobiography in 1967, which was later made into a film directed by Irving Rapper (The Christine Jorgensen Story) in 1970. That same year Gore Vidal’s 1968 novel Myra Breckinridge was made into a film of the same name, but both the novel and film dealt
with transsexuality in a sensationalistic fashion. Richard Raskind was an unknown New York state ophthalmologist. He began making headlines in the 1970s after transitioning from male to female and playing tennis on the women’s professional circuit as Renée Richards. When her transsexual status was found out, the media went wild with the story and American culture debated whether a person born male, but surgically transformed into a woman, should be allowed to play professional tennis as a female. Richards wrote an autobiography entitled Second Serve (1983) that was turned into a television movie of the same name in 1986. While there had been both print and filmic texts created about celebrity transsexuals, the average “transvestite” or “transsexual” was largely invisible to the general public.

However, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, one of the places which afforded trans people a degree of visibility was the daytime television talk show. The genre was pioneered by Phil Donahue, whose long-running program The Phil Donahue Show began in Dayton, Ohio in 1967. The show moved to Chicago and then later to New York and did not end its long run until 1996. From its inception, The Phil Donahue Show tackled controversial issues that challenged conservative American values. From atheism to sexual abuse, from feminism to male strippers, from homosexuality to abortion, Donahue brought interesting and contentious social issues into the American living room for nearly thirty years. Early in the program’s existence, Donahue featured stories of cross-dressers, transsexuals, female impersonators and other gender-variant subjects. These shows invariably brought high ratings and became a staple on Donahue, and later on his imitators, Geraldo Rivera, Jerry Springer, Maury Povich, Sally Jesse Raphael, Ricki Lake and many others. Oprah Winfrey has emerged as the queen of television
talk, and features shows on transsexualism relatively infrequently, although there have been programs about Jennifer Boylan (author of *She’s Not There*), transgender children and Thomas Beatie, dubbed “the pregnant man.”

As society became more vocal about issues that had previously been swept under the carpet, gradually we began to see more film and televisions programs which dealt with issues of gender diversity. In the sitcom genre, transgender issues began to appear in the 1970s. For example, *All in the Family* featured female impersonator Beverly LaSalle in three different episodes between 1975-1977, and *Soap* introduced proto-transsexual character Jodie (played by Billy Crystal) in 1977. Also that year, *The Jeffersons* featured an episode where George’s navy buddy re-emerges as a transsexual woman, while *Night Court* featured a similar episode in 1985 when Dan’s high school buddy comes back as a woman and Dan tries to deal with the shock. In 1990, *The Golden Girls* featured an episode in which Dorothy’s cross-dresser brother Phil passes away and the family comes to a greater acceptance of his gender identity. In 1997, *The Drew Carey Show* featured an episode where Drew’s brother came out of the closet as a heterosexual cross-dresser. Sitcoms such as *In the House*, *Becker*, *Just Shoot Me* and *Barbershop* continued to explore transgender themes through the 1990s and into the new millennium.

On the big screen in the 1980s, the movie *Tootsie* helped to encourage discussions of gender by virtue of its memorable cross-dressing protagonist played by Dustin Hoffman. The heterosexual male character dressed as a woman in order to land a role as an actress on a soap opera. There were other films that featured cross-dressing contrived for some plot device, such as the female high school student who goes “undercover” as a
male to write a story for a newspaper in *Just One of the Guys* (1985), and the 1989 Chad Lowe film *Nobody’s Perfect* where he cross-dresses to get closer to the girl of his dreams. Robin Williams’s *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993) featured a man who posed as a nanny in order to gain more frequent access to his children who live with their mother, his ex-wife.

Other films featured characters at various places on the transgender spectrum. Neil Jordan’s 1992 drama *The Crying Game* dealt with transgender protagonist Dil and hir involvement with a member of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), while *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) featured two drag queens and a post-op transsexual woman making their way across the Australian desert in a tour bus to play a show in a remote location. The biopic *Ed Wood*, also released in 1994, told the real-life story of the *Glen or Glenda* producer and hir obsession with angora sweaters, as well as hir involvement with a motley crew of lovable eccentrics. Even as more and more interesting images proliferated on both the little and big screens, generic constraints tended to allow little room for more multifaceted or daring depictions of trans people.

Since the beginning of the trans movement in the early 1990s, these images have begun to proliferate and diversify. From the heartbreaking story of a gender-variant child in *Ma Vie en Rose* (1997) to the searing *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999), which won Hilary Swank an Oscar, films have begun to push the envelope to portray more multifaceted and diverse trans experiences. *The Adventures of Sebastian Cole* (1998) tells the story of a boy coming to terms with his step-father’s decision to gender-transition, while *Normal* (2003) details the transition of a middle-aged, Midwestern, blue-collar husband and father who begins to cross from male to female. *Soldier’s Girl* (2003) recounts the true-life story of private Barry Winchell, who was killed by a fellow soldier in a hate-
motivated attack because Winchell was dating transgendered MTF nightclub performer Calpernia Addams. As we progress further into the new millennium, films such *Breakfast on Pluto* and *TransAmerica* continue to break new ground due to their more complex representations.

Documentaries about transgender subjects are not a new phenomenon. One of the earliest, 1984’s *What Sex Am I*? featured a cross-section of cross-dressers and both MTF and FTM transsexuals. Newer documentaries have won awards and educated many people, such as the A&E Investigative report *The Transgender Revolution* (1998), which is an excellent overview of the personal and political issues faced by trans people in American society. *Southern Comfort* (2001), the story of FTM transsexual Robert Eads and his battle with ovarian cancer, is especially poignant and powerful. A variety of documentaries have chronicled the unique experiences of FTMs, including *You Don’t Know Dick: Courageous Hearts of Transsexual Men* (1996), *Trappings of Transhood* (1997), *A Boy Named Sue* (2000), *Sir: Just a Normal Guy* (2003), and *Boy I Am* (2006). The emerging drag king scene was put to film in *Venus Boyz* (2002) while the life of FTM parents was captured in Jules Rosskam’s 2005 documentary *TransParent*.

Despite shifts in representation, one quickly comes to the conclusion that the majority of images of trans people repeatedly downplays the social, cultural and political implications of trans people’s lives, and focus instead on micro-level experiences and salacious personal details. For example, issues such as sexuality, sex reassignment surgery, and non-accepting family members are overrepresented in media depictions. However, issues such as discrimination, the binary gender system and civil rights initiatives, which have been a focus of the transgender movement, are rarely depicted.
Media images have the remarkable power of shaping perception and informing consciousness; they are a veritable double-edged sword in that they can reflect, create and challenge stereotypes and categories of identification.

**Contributions of Study**

Transgender Studies is a burgeoning field of academic inquiry. Like lesbian/gay/queer studies, it is interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary, with both strengths and weaknesses. Unfortunately, transgender studies often feels like an academic area without a home. Transgender studies work has been done in sociological investigations, literary analysis, anthropological cross-cultural studies, social work research, psychology and counseling qualitative studies, photography, and many other areas. In 2006, editors Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle released *The Transgender Studies Reader*, a volume that brings together some of the best academic pieces in the field. *Transgender Rights*, edited by Paisley Currah, Richard Juang and Shannon Price Minter is another excellent contribution to the field.

The floating nature of transgender studies in the academy is a strength, in that it is truly interdisciplinary work having an impact on other fields of study. On the other hand, one who attempts to “do” trans studies is faced with a variety of challenges and scholarly dilemmas. There is no core “theory” for trans studies, nor is there a universal methodology associated with the field. Because it is a relatively new field and because transgenderism is still so heavily stigmatized, it is likely that a researcher will be the only person doing trans studies at the their respective institutions. Very few departments or programs in lesbian/gay/queer studies exist, even fewer such programs in transgender studies. Because of this, most researchers conducting trans studies are working out of the
traditional disciplines, or in pre-existing interdisciplinary fields such as American studies, cultural studies, and women’s/gender studies.

The linking of trans studies with women’s studies or lesbian/gay/queer studies has been a mixed blessing. Queer theory has opened up a space to critically interrogate gender and sexuality paradigms in our society and given us tools to analyze the ubiquity of heterosexuality in our culture. It has aided those of us in trans studies by its attentiveness to the binary divisions of sex, gender and sexuality and how these systems structure the lives of everyday people. Although queer theory intersects with trans studies, its limitations for the field are troubling. Viviane Namaste has written succinctly about the complicated relationship between trans studies and queer theory. “Queer theory as it is currently practiced must be challenged because it exhibits a remarkable insensitivity to the substantive issues of transgendered people’s everyday lives. Given this utter disregard for how transgendered people live, a rejection of queer theory based on such a political argument is both worthy and warranted” (23). Namaste also notes that, “Critics in queer theory write page after page on the inherent liberation of transgressing normative sex/gender codes, but they have nothing to say about the precarious position of the transsexual woman who is battered and who is unable to access a woman’s shelter because she was not born a biological woman” (9-10).

Cissexual authors have a long history of usurping and appropriating the lives and identities of trans people for use in their own academic research. Jacob Hale composed a list of suggested rules for cisgender people writing about trans people because there has been so much problematic work created about our community by outsiders. Much of the work on gender transgression has continued to be written by
non-trans identified researchers, scientists, academics and theorists. Sadly, transgender-authored texts about gender theory continue to be few and far between. In addition, this issue of appropriation is even worse when one adds the dynamics of race, educational attainment and socio-economic status. Transphobia in academia, as well as larger structural inequalities, have made it difficult for trans people to obtain the credentials to write their own analyses. This has slowly begun to change since the 1990s, but we have a long way left to travel.

In addition, trans studies has also had a vexed relationship to both feminism and women’s studies. Feminist theoretical critiques about the social construction of gender, the structure of societal gender roles, and the influence of sexism and misogyny have been a pivotal backdrop for the emergence of trans studies and transfeminist discourse. It is critical to understand the ways in which trans identities are situated within a patriarchal society, and how patriarchal domination contributes to the oppression of those who stray from hegemonic gender conventions. However, there are certain streams of feminism (such as cultural feminism, radical feminism and lesbian feminism) that often view transgenderism with suspicion or outright hostility and hatred. Trans women are cast as fakers who wish to further patriarchy by using their male privilege to take over women’s spaces and identities. Women’s studies has a particular institutional, academic and political history that must be analyzed in order to understand the placement of trans studies. While doing trans studies under the umbrella of women’s studies or gay/lesbian/queer studies is entirely possible, it is not without its own set of risks.

This study attempts to be a “trans studies” that is neither elided by other disciplines nor uninformed by them. This study synthesizes trans images in a variety of
media, but is largely concerned with mainstream movies. I identify trans images over the span of several decades, which will help to socio-culturally situate these texts and point to shifts in political and representational trends. Ultimately, this study attempts to do for trans images what Vito Russo did for gays and lesbians in *The Celluloid Closet*: proffer a sweeping analysis to ponder what images reveal about society and culture and what impact transgender political mobilization has had and will continue to have on media productions. It is impossible to fully analyze media representations of transgender individuals without taking into account material realities which include pervasive employment and housing discrimination, sexualization, pathologization, culturally incompetent medical care and rampant violence. At least one trans person is killed each month in a vicious hate-crime in the United States. Representations, of course, are not to blame for homicides. However, can it be said that they contribute to a cultural climate that perpetuates transphobia and the hatred of gender diverse persons? In this dissertation, I track the trends in media representations of transgender people. What I found is that in general transgender characters are most often represented as deceptive, maniacal, tragic, victimized and without supportive community or a sense of political agency to transform their own life and the society as a whole.

Reel gender is a term that I will use to refer to the multiplicity of trans images under the analytic microscope. The “reel world” culture producers create and transmit images of gender and sexuality that I am interested in analyzing, interrogating and deconstructing. In particular, I am interested in comparing and contrasting the images of the “reel world” to the varied lived experiences of transpeople in the “real world.” The “reel world” and the “real world” are not, of course, mutually exclusive. Reel world
images affect real world experiences, and vice versa. In addition, I do not in any way intend to connote that the “real world” is a monolithic, stable and universal reality equally felt by all people who identify as transgender or transsexual. The relationship between reel images and real world lived experiences is a complicated one, but one that is worth exploring in depth to gauge how the culture views people who cross, blur and transcend the rigidly enforced categories of male and female, masculine and feminine.

Sadly, the mass media (“reel world”) continues to transmit disturbing images that more often than not present gender-variant persons as objects rather than fully constituted subjects, with *The Jerry Springer Show* as the most glaring and long-lasting example. This study will interrogate these images for the conservatizing cultural work that they perform, as well as examine the interstices of liberatory potential often hiding beneath the surface.

**Literature Review**

While there have been a number of articles about trans media studies, there have been few book length studies. Three books offer photographs of male-bodied people donning drag in the movies, but offer very little analysis.\(^{38}\) Rebecca Bell-Metereau’s *Hollywood Androgyny*, published in 1993, looks at cross-dressing in over 250 films throughout the history of Hollywood productions; however she does not talk about transgender liberation in a politicized sense. *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* by Stella Bruzzi contains two chapters on transgender in films: “The Comedy of Cross-Dressing” and “The Erotic Strategies of Androgyny.” In *Queer (Un)Friendly Film and Television*, James Keller discusses the film *Flawless* in “Rehabilitating the Camera: Loquacious Queens and Male Autism in *Flawless.*” Parker
Tyler includes limited information on cross-dressers and transsexuals in film in his book *Screening the Sexes: Homosexuality in the Movies*, as does Vito Russo in his masterwork *The Celluloid Closet*. Chris Straayer includes several chapters on transgenderism in film in the book *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-Orientation in Film and Video*. One of the most recent contributions is *Transgender on Screen* by John Phillips, which covers some of the same ground that I do in this dissertation.

Two key writers who take an approach similar to mine are Joshua Gamson and Judith Halberstam. In the groundbreaking *Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity*, Gamson examines the GLBT issues in daytime television talk shows. He presents a cogent history of the genre and places these images in a social, cultural, economic and political context. The book is cultural studies at its best because of the way in which Gamson seamlessly blends in-depth textual analysis with a larger socio-political criticism. From reading this text, the reader not only gets a thorough understanding of how sexual orientation and gender identity are treated in the talk show genre, but also sees how these images intersect with culture. While Gamson avoids making pat generalizations or universalizing claims about his subject matter, we do see a picture begin to emerge. Talk shows both construct and reflect societal views regarding LGBT people and issues. They demonstrate both a cultural fascination and a cultural loathing, often simultaneously. While talk shows often transmit hegemonic ideology regarding gender and sexuality, they can also often subvert or challenge the status quo. In Gamson’s expert prose, LGBT people on talk shows are not cast only as hapless victims; their agency to construct their own stories and visibility is, in fact, highlighted. However, a critical perspective is needed to unpack these often complex, conflicting and
ambivalent representations, as the genre is based on creating conflict and attracting
viewers to satisfy the interests of commercial sponsors.

Judith Halberstam is the author of *Female Masculinity* and *In a Queer Time and
Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. In these books, Halberstam examines
film, literature and culture to analyze the position of FTMs and masculine, or butch,
female-bodied individuals. Spanning the nineteenth century to the present day, *Female
Masculinity* contains nuanced and engaging textual analysis. In order to explore female-
bodied people who express masculinity, Halberstam explores *The Well of Loneliness*,
Anne Lister’s diaries and butch representations in both Hollywood and independent
cinema. She also explores the controversy between the butch lesbian and the FTM
community, and includes a chapter on the emerging drag king[^39] scene. Rigorously
interdisciplinary, Halberstam’s work brings together multiple genres to place the
masculine female in a socio-political, and aesthetic, context. *In a Queer Time and Place*
continues this trend by examining representations of gender-variant people in fiction,
visual art, film, and popular music. The book includes discussion of the life and death of
FTM Brandon Teena, the art house film *By Hook or By Crook*, the art of Del LaGrace
Volcano, the music of Le Tigre and Sleater-Kinney, and the influence of drag king
culture on mainstream films such as *Austin Powers*. Halberstam argues that there is a
distinct “queer time” and “queer space.” “Part of what has made queerness compelling as
a form of self-description in the past decade or so has to do with the way it has potential
to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space” (2). Like
Gamson’s, Halberstam’s work is an example of postmodern cultural studies research
which blends innovative ideas with textual analysis and empirical research. My study
similarly aims to blend a diverse cross-section of popular culture texts in order to gauge cultural attitudes regarding gender and sexuality. Gamson and Halberstam both pull from queer theory and cultural studies, but do not let go of their political commitments in the process. The authors discuss how meanings about gender and sexuality are produced and how they circulate throughout culture to structure identities and promulgate ideology. At the same time, both authors are committed to granting a sense of agency to viewers and to seeing media as a site of contentious debate where alternate meanings are often wrested from seemingly contradictory textual messages. Next, I would like to look at the theoretical toolbox I use and the thorny theoretical tensions present in this dissertation. I will begin with a discussion of the socially-constructed and performative way that I view gender.

**Opening the Theoretical Toolbox: Gender, Postmodernism and Cultural Studies**

Judith Butler’s work on gender has been enormously helpful in illuminating the way that gender is constructed in society and culture. She writes that, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Gender Trouble 43-44). This goes beyond the much-used dictum that gender is a social construct. In fact, Butler takes pains to remind us that both gender and sex are constructed, and the notion that gender is a social-cultural overlay placed onto unmarked, “biologically” sexed bodies is both naïve and incorrect. Sex is always already gender, because the category of “sex” does not enter into a vacuum, but into a socially and politically charged environment eager to rigidly police bodies. Butler consciously deconstructs the oft-used distinction between “sex” and “gender” to call attention to the
way that these terms may unwittingly help to preserve a nature/culture dualism that is ineffective in describing the radically complex terrain of sex and gender diversity. Butler rejects the notion that there is a “natural” sexed body that predates discourse; sex, like gender, is a discursive production that is impossible to neatly bifurcate. Butler’s notion of gender performativity is a key concept to guide our discussion of identity politics and political praxis.

Gender, as a “repeated stylization of the body” is performed, something that one does, rather than what one is. Butler’s gender performativity has been frequently misread. Butler does not imply a volitional subject who picks and chooses a gender from their wardrobe closet at free will and theatrically performs it. In actuality, her complex theory actually reverses this idea by explicating that the subject does not do gender, gender does the subject. Gender is not a static noun; it is a hyperactive verb. Gender performativity is not a singular act but rather a series of repeated acts that take on the guise of a naturalized category:

The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. In this way, it showed that what we take to be an ‘internal’ feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures. (Gender Trouble xv)

The notion of a core gender identity is based on the false premise of a unified interiority and cohesive subjectivity. Gender acts upon subjects in ways which produce the very notion of a unified gender identity; in actuality identity is highly fragmented and
splintered. The body and its relation to gender performativity is recounted thus by Butler in *Gender Trouble*:

...acts, gestures and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (173)

At first glance, it would appear that according to Butler’s theories we are all doomed to live out existences structured by powerful gender systems, that gender effectively “does” us (in) but we can never “do” *it*. While Butler eschews the notion of a completely volitional subject, she does endorse an agency that has the potential for sexual subversion. One of the core beliefs in our culture is that gender is “real” and “authentic.” People are born with particular genitalia that make them naturally belong to discrete sex/gender categorizations. Any deviations from this rigid framework of dimorphous gender are seen as “fake” or as derivative. Butler underscores the fact that *all* gender expressions are derivative copies; there is no genuine original. In common sense understandings, drag is often viewed as “copying” or mimicking a “true” gender expression; a female who dresses as a man is simply a synthetic copy of an authentic and reliable original. Butler’s theory of gender states that drag is simply a copy of a copy,
one more expression in a long line of imitations whereby finding the original is not possible because it cannot be said to exist.

Because people possess agency, it is possible to re-enact gender in ways that challenge the gender binary and the perpetuation of heteronormativity. The “rigid regulatory frame” that Butler describes can be made visible through deploying gender in subversive ways. Sexual subversion is facilitated when gender is revealed to be a regulatory fiction that governs society in oppressive ways rather than as a universal, ahistorical essence which people fall into “normally” and “naturally.” Drag, parody and camp are examples of phenomena that have the potential to disrupt hegemonic systems of sex, gender and desire. Butler calls for gender performances that “enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire” (177).

Although Butler sees drag as having the potential to at least highlight the performative nature of gender, feminism has a vexed relationship to drag and drag queens in particular. Since drag queens embody social constructions of femininity, should they not be included in feminist political praxis? MTF drag has frequently been criticized by some feminists for the way in which it “degrades” and objectifies women. While some drag queening may have misogynistic elements as it circulates within a patriarchal culture, the charge that it is “degrading” calls out for interrogation and is premised on a faulty assumption. These critiques rely on a straightforward relationship between imitation and original, synthetic and real, which reproduces the notion that there are “genuine” women who are being misrepresented and debased by inauthentic pretenders. This charge incorporates essentialist theorizing because it posits a universal monolith of
“women” who are in need of defense from the maneuvers of uniformly sexist and misogynistic men in “degrading” drag. Butler writes:

As much as drag creates a unified picture of ‘woman’ (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency* (175).

Those who would similarly deride drag kinging as being a mockery of men miss the point: drag kinging can use the signs and symbols of gender to destabilize it through the disunity invoked between bodily surfaces and corporeal topographies versus incongruent outward gender expressions and communications of gender on the stage and on the street.

Butler’s theories of gender performativity frame this project in a series of ways. Firstly, gender is not an essential, ahistorical truism but rather a contingent, incoherent and socio-culturally produced phenomenon. While often paraded throughout culture as a “fact” of nature, biology and stable bodily topography, its illusory qualities must be radically interrogated in order to expose its multiple fictive seams. Transgender representations are a site where we can deploy Butlerian theories to deconstruct how gender performativity operates. How do actors, characters, script-writers, directors and viewers contribute to a sense of gender as performance versus gender as an essentialized, fixed reality? How do trans images contribute to an understanding of gender as an endless chain of copies of copies within a framework of signification, and how do they reveal and conceal the ways in which gender is a site of discursivity? In addition, how
might we make sense of trans identities in film given Butler’s notion that although gender is performative, it is not voluntarist? These and other questions provide a theoretical backdrop for understanding my take on gender identity, expression, attribution and oppression in media culture.

Just as gender is performed on stage in drag shows, gender is performed day-to-day on the street. Film and television capture these performances and add yet another layer of spectatorship. While some in the “real” world may regard another person’s gender expression directly on the street, film and television add another tier of mediation. When I watch a traditionally gendered or transgender person’s gender expression on the small or big screen, I am watching it filtered through the lens of a media production. This does not delegitimize the image, but it means that it is impossible to regard the image in an unmediated fashion. Trans media images may thus be seen not only through the lens of culture, but through the lens of formalist and generic conventions of filmic and televisial styles, codes and modes of looking. Next, I would like to elaborate more on postmodern theory and my project’s relationship to media and cultural studies.

**Postmodernism and Media Culture**

Postmodernism has rocked the academy now since the 1980s. It is a rich critical framework that has affected the work of many people in the humanities, social sciences and cultural studies. In this section, I would like to lay out my understanding of postmodernism and how this critical school of thought has affected the study of media texts. Finally, I will discuss my own theoretical orientation in this dissertation, and how it both utilizes postmodernism and parts company with it, particularly in regards to gender and media.
Postmodernism as a tool in the critical toolbox is vitally important. Postmodernism is, in many ways, similar to a virus scan on a computer. It scans discursive and ideological terrains with its greatest weapon: skepticism. As Lyotard famously wrote, postmodernism is characterized by “incredulity toward metanarratives.” Over time, these master narratives have congealed and taken on the illusion of absolute Truth. Postmodernist theory wishes to deconstruct “The Truth” and replace it with a plurality of truths. It seeks to ferret out ideological certainty and replace it with a more healthy sense of skepticism and doubt. Postmodernism wishes to cast aspersions on notions of stability, coherence and fixity and replace them with a critical lens that emphasizes the partiality of truth, the contingency of knowledge and the constructed nature of socio-cultural institutions. As a defense against overarching, global and totalizing cultural critique, postmodernism prefers looking at the micro-level, the local and the ways in which institutions are socially, culturally, economically and politically bound. This is not to the exclusion of more macro-level work, but rather micro-level examples may be used as anchors in order to support broader epistemological claims.

Postmodernism seeks to draw attention to scholarly conventions and practices that routinely reproduce unexamined meta-narratives. I know of few social categorizations as marked by conventions as gender. In this way, my reading of gender and sexuality often relies on the critical school of postmodernism for its analytic power. My reading of gender and sexuality in these texts presupposes postmodernism as a point of departure, as discussed above in my discussion of Butlerian theories. Postmodernism allows me to perform a critical unpacking of ideologies of gender and sexuality in media texts and textualities. It provides the needed ammunition to interrogate and deconstruct texts and
place them in a larger social, cultural, political and economic framework. At the same
time, its skepticism towards a unilateral critical approach (e.g. Marxism) requires
scholars to imagine approaches that resist simplistic foreclosing of narratives and instead
imagine textualities as sites of multiple and competing claims for meaning.
Postmodernism encourages closet textual analyses and deconstructive readings that urge
critics to pay attention to internal contradictions within the text itself. With gender and
sexuality issues in media texts, this is a particularly important point given the way that
these phenomena so often work against themselves to reveal much higher levels of
ambiguity, ambivalence and multiplicity in the text than they might intend to.

However, I also resist some more extreme variants of postmodernism which
would emphasize the endless play of gender signifiers and abstract theorizations to the
exclusion of social, cultural and political issues that affect the material lives of trans
people. As discussed previously, some transgender scholars have taken issue with some
facets of queer theory, which is greatly associated with postmodernism. Queer theory
can be criticized for a lack of attentiveness to material and structural concerns, including
the materiality of the body. Central to this dissertation is an emphasis on the trans body
as a “real” entity that struggles for survival in the margins of American culture. Too
often, postmodernism promotes a textualization of bodies that ignores or minimizes that
body’s placement as the victim of forces of cultural violence, terrorism and state-
sanctioned oppression. My emphasis on hate crimes directed against gender
nonconforming people is one antidote for a postmodernism that is seen as not adequately
attentive to flesh-and-blood struggles for survival, not to mention full enfranchisement as
citizens.
This ambivalence towards postmodernism is highlighted even more by my engagement with media texts. Postmodernism resists simplistic readings of media texts that attempt to obtain a singular or universal meaning. Media texts have a multiplicity of meanings that are readable by viewers. Viewers are not passive zombies who receive hegemonic cultural inscriptions from texts and then add those beliefs to their worldview. Viewers often resist dominant readings of texts and construct alternate possibilities that are subversive and counter-cultural. Media and cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall maintains that there are at least three possible ways that viewers engage with texts: dominant ideology or preferred readings, negotiated readings and oppositional or against-the-grain readings. Hall was a leading theorist in reception theory and helped to usher in a postmodernist understanding of the complex interplay between media producer, media text and media consumer. Postmodernism has gone to great lengths to stress the importance of diverse audience reactions to texts and the fact that spectators often make meaning based on the particulars of their own social location. Postmodernism also stresses the pleasure of the text and the production of identity through interfacing with cultural texts.

Although my project is informed by this range of insights, I am most concerned in this project with hegemonic ideologies and what Hall terms “preferred (or dominant) readings.” This is not in any way to devalue the importance of looking at trans images from more negotiated or oppositional readings. However, I would like to assert that the study of transgender media is a relatively new area of academic inquiry. There are not multiple volumes that analyze many of the texts I examine here, and in particular there are few academic works that look at trans images in a systematic way. Thus, I believe
that before we can work to understand readings against-the-grain, we must first fully
comprehend the ways in which dominant cultural ideologies of sex, gender and desire are
often encoded in texts that feature trans or gender-variant representations. Given the
continued dearth of consideration of the insidious nature of transphobia and cissexism, I
am interested in examining how these phenomena are encoded within media texts,
although this does not blind me to the fact that these encoded meanings are not universal,
easily predicted, stable or coherent.

The “hypodermic needle” model of media studies suggests that a media message is
shot directly into a person’s veins via a hypodermic needle, rushing through that person’s
bloodstream without any resistance. This model has, of course, been thoroughly
challenged and is now basically considered to be obsolete. However, in the postmodern
rush to re-center the audience and their usage and pleasure from media text, one might
ask: what has been lost? Helen Wood writes:

> The ‘ethnographic turn’ contributed to the maturing of the field as
> contexts of consumption are now recognized as having significant impact
> upon the processes of the interpretation of media. Sometimes
> characterized as the ‘active audience’ approach, this paradigm has
> attracted criticism for the apparent jettisoning of the influence of cultural
> power, diminishing the authority of the text while elevating the influence
> of context (76).

While my training in academia as a scholar and theorist is important to this project,
the considerable learning I have done “on the job” as a grass-roots activist is equally
important to me. It is imperative to me that I bring both my academic and activist
credentials to bear on this project. The situation for trans people in the U.S. and across the globe is, in a word, dire. One of the fundamental questions I attempt to tease apart in this dissertation is: how do mass-mediated cultural texts contribute to the maintenance and perpetuation of always already circulating transphobic discourses? How do these images contribute to the solidification of cultural codes and master texts (discussed below) that function to straitjacket “real world” trans people by framing them in limiting ways? How do they conceal the multifaceted and multidimensional humanity of gender-variant people by rendering alternate representations as unintelligible or illegible?

It could be said that a small but important part of this study is informed by a quotidian autoethnography. As a gender-variant person whose gender expression is often rendered unintelligible by agents of hegemonic society day in and day out, my analyzing mind reacts to the verbal and nonverbal cues I receive from actors in the social realm, responding to the mundane but socially significant interactions whereby “gender” functions to shape social interactions. From the received looks of confusion, hostility, anger, disgust, amusement, ridicule, and/or pity, I try to determine what enters into creating such an emotive response. Whether calling me “sir” or “ma’am” or “ma’am-sir” or engaging in pronounced pronoun anxiety and deliberation, the verbal reactions to my gender liminality interest me as much as they often frustrate me. For, as Kate Bornstein discusses in an interview with Robin Bernstein, one of the functions of gender is to create traction in the world and the society (Bernstein). My autoethnographic insights, therefore, confirm that deviations from gender bipolarity often shock people into confrontations they are ill equipped to meet. Behind the mind of the inquiring academic lies great vulnerability and even terror. The totality and complexity of these interactions
undoubtedly impacts upon the writing in this dissertation. Feminism has maintained for decades the motto that the personal is political. My personal experiences within the social realm, as well as my political commitments, combine to create a reading position of media texts. If we are so eager to mark the consumer of media as active, critical and oppositional, then surely we can extend the same courtesy to the researcher writing about and analyzing said media images. Next I would like to continue to meditate on my social location and how it informs this project.

Social Location

I identify as a white, MTF transgender, queer, politically progressive, feminist individual with hidden disabilities. I currently live in the Midwest, although I hail from New England, and have lived in rural environments most of my life. I come from a thoroughly blue-collar, working-class family and I am a first-generation college student. I have two master’s degrees and attended an elite private academy in secondary school. I work as an educator and activist on behalf of queer, feminist, transgender, anti-racist and social justice concerns, have produced two autobiographical films (*A Transgender Path* and *TransAmazon*) and self-published a collection of poems entitled *Gender Quake*.

Due to my activist and political commitments, as well as to my social identities, I bring to this work a keen interest in social justice, media literacy, and activism. While theory informs this work, I am also interested in how we can make research about media applicable to hands-on activists who wish to use media to reach realizable political goals. How can we deepen the connection between academic research and praxis, so that the work done in the “ivory tower” is useful beyond its own limited walls? My identity as an activist and a social justice educator brings to this work a certain pragmatism that hopes
to see the work used as a resource to further trans civil rights and work to redefine and deconstruct social constructs such as gender, race and sexuality. In addition, my own location imbues this work with a decided focus on material concerns: employment, civil rights, freedom from discrimination and police harassment, access to health care, housing and a commitment to redistribution of wealth and resources.

Sadly, much work in the humanities has contributed to the textualization of bodies, whereby real-life, flesh-and-blood bodies become concealed by a layer of arcane theorizations written in academic jargon and divorced from a connection to political struggles around the globe. This is particularly problematic given the social reality of many transgender people, where unemployment, homelessness, familial rejection, police brutality, sex survival work, depression, substance abuse, suicidal ideation and hate crimes/violent attacks continue to be common problems in American society. While filmic texts (the “reel”) should not be held to an overly rigid standard of “truthfully” representing reality, it should not be forgotten that they circulate within a particular social, economic and political economy that has stiff penalties for “real” trans people attempting to forge a life for themselves. As Stuart Hall writes in Representation:

> Power, it seems, has to be understood here, not only in terms of economic exploitation and physical coercion, but also in broader cultural or symbolic terms, including the power to represent someone or something in a certain way—within a certain ‘regime of representation.’ It includes the exercise of symbolic power through representational practices (259).
Until quite recently, transgender people have not had the economic or cultural capital to create representations of themselves. Thus the transgender “reel” has too often been saddled with stereotypes and misinformation.

The connection between the “reel” and the “real” is a central question for this study. How do the two affect each other? What should our expectations of media be (which is often for entertainment purposes and almost always for commercial profit) and how do our own social locations (identities, political affiliations, artistic tastes) construct our responses and desire for different images?

An Activist Scholar

While agreeing that an overly prescriptive criticism runs the risk of replicating the very ideologies I am critiquing, I am not willing to throw the baby out with the proverbial bathwater. Politics, a strong political current, runs through this dissertation due to my personal, activist and ideological commitments. In many ways, my goal is progressivism. While reading through the often conservatizing and status quo representations of gender and sexuality in these texts, my goal is to interrogate the cultural work of these depictions and suggest more progressive ways of recasting sex, gender and desire that promote liberation, freedom and creativity rather than constraint, coercion and delimitation.

Paula Saukko nicely encapsulates some of the tension in doing textual analysis under the aegis of a postmodern cultural studies framework:

The interest in texts within the social context is umbilically connected with an interest in power. Originally, the interest in power articulated cultural studies’ attempt to reformulate the Marxist notion of “ideology,” which interpreted culture largely in terms of dominant ideology that
distorts reality in a way that serves the interest of the powerful. While cultural studies continues to examine the relationship between culture and social domination, it understands cultural texts, such as popular culture products, not to be mere loci of domination. Rather, it views them as a site of contestation over meaning, where different groups compete to set forth their understandings of the state of affairs in the world. (100)

I appreciate the way in which Saukko captures one of the major tensions in this work. My tendency, for better or worse, is to view media representations as ideology in the Marxist sense. In other words, I assert that media representations of transgender people primarily serve the interests of the ruling class. However, this overly simplified model ignores the agency of viewers to create their own meaning, the “contestation” over meaning that is affected by both domination and resistance. One of the ways I have attempted to deal with this tension is through careful choice of language—thus I would like to explore my use of two terms: cultural codes and master texts.

**Cultural Codes and Master Texts: Interrogating Cultural Hegemony**

When I began writing this dissertation, I utilized the term “cultural residue” to refer to the hegemonic and oppressive cultural ideologies left behind after viewing filmic or televisual texts that perpetuate the status quo. However, I decided this term reified ideology as simply a form of domination. In order to draw attention to textualities as a place of contentious debate and negotiation I decided to use the term “cultural code” instead. I first came across this term when researching the Mammy Stereotype (covered in Chapter 2) in American culture. Lisa Anderson writes:

The icon of the mammy is, without doubt, a myth created in the white
imagination, and is conveyed by the discourses of theatre and film, and widely disseminated. Mammy appears, as Roland Barthes would say, “both like a notification and like a statement of fact.” Interpretation of the myth as a fact seeps through the entire culture, where it is in turn transformed into fact. That is, mammy becomes a cultural code, determining how real black women are seen. (39)

In this dissertation, I am arguing that certain representations of transgender people are transformed from myth to fact to cultural code. These cultural codes, originating in the reel world and widely disseminated, structure how real world transgender people are seen and potentially limit what they can become. Arthur Asa Berger writes, “There are in every society, semioticians suggest, culture codes—hidden structures (in the sense that we are not aware of them or pay no attention to them) that shape our behaviors” (82-83).

The goal of this project is to enable us to better see the cultural codes at work that purport to represent transgender people. These cultural codes “seeps through the entire culture” and structures real world interactions with gender nonconforming people. As Berger asserts, the “work of cultural critics involves the process of decoding texts of various kinds in many different realms” (83). Through decoding cultural codes, we can expose the limitations placed on gender-variant people and encourage spectators of media texts to bring a greater critical interrogation to the hidden structures that potentially shape our values and behaviors.

In addition to cultural codes, I would like to add the value of the term “master texts.” I came across this term in the work of Vek Lewis.

And if the experience of contemporary urban life in Latin America is
increasingly scripted by the media’s use of fear’s vocabulary, a phobic lexicography which separates the sexually normative from the “aberrant,” wherein *travestis* become the usual suspects, it is unsurprising that Demetrio the killer cross-dresser gains status as a master text for expressing fear of the other. (25)

The stereotyped characters that fill the transgender media canon work in a similar fashion. The accumulation of particular types (Transgender Deceivers, Mammies, and Monsters) can be analyzed as “master texts.” This properly ascribes to them the power that they possess through their hegemonic position within cultural circulation. However, obviously a master text, although in a position of dominance, is not the *only* text available. Alternative texts exist as well, although it would be illegitimate to assign them a level of cultural symmetry. The “master texts” I describe here further the circulation of cultural codes that delimit the potentiality of pluralistic gender expression, subversion and transgression. I will next discuss two authors who similarly found cultural codes in filmic texts and used these tropes to illuminate the lives of minoritized groups.

**Bogle and Russo: Models for Deciphering Trans Images**

As I was researching this dissertation, two of the books I picked up were *The Celluloid Closet* by Vito Russo and *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks* (*TCM MB*) by Donald Bogle. Both proved helpful for shedding light on this project.

Originally released in 1973, *TCM MB* is now in its fourth edition. The new edition covers images of African Americans in film from the early 1900s through the late 1990s. Through covering a century of filmic representations of Black Americans, Bogle is able to identify recurring stereotypes that emerged from the canon of U.S. cinema. He begins
with The Tom, describing him thus: “Always as toms are chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted, they keep the faith, n’er turn against their white massas, and remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very-kind” (6). Bogle describes The Coon as a representation of the Negro as “amusement object and black buffoon” (7). The Tragic Mulatto, although presented as likeable and sympathetic, is doomed to a life of misery and tragedy due to her mixed racial heritage while The Mammy is marked as a “big, fat, and cantankerous” personality closely related to the “comic coon” (9). Bogle’s final mythic type, exemplified in the films of D.W. Griffith, is The Buck. “Bucks are always big, baadddd niggers, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh” (13-14). Through his analysis of many films, Bogle demonstrates how these five “mythic types” appear over and over again. Most Black actors have played some version of a stereotype, but many are able to transform the limitations of the role through the brilliance of their performance and acting chops. Bogle’s model of stereotypes and mythical types provides a useful structure for analyzing the pantheon of Black images in American screen history.

Vito Russo’s groundbreaking text *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* was originally released in 1981, with a revised edition released in 1987. Russo died as a result of complications from AIDS in 1990, but his book was turned into an HBO documentary film of the same name narrated by Lily Tomlin in 1996. Russo is to be commended for this comprehensive project, which examines in excess of 300 movies over a span of about 80 years, starting in the 1970s when the closet mentality ruled supreme. In the introduction he writes: “Almost all of the people I spoke with reacted as though they had never considered a discussion of homosexuality as anything but potential
gossip; the idea of examining images of gay people onscreen was barely a legitimate concept to most” (xii). Although not organized around stereotyped character types per se, Russo does indeed, like Bogle, discuss a range of different stereotypes that emerge from the canon of films that depict homosexuality. Russo’s first chapter identifies the “sissy” stereotype and describes the many cinematic examples of the typecast “nelly” homosexual. “To the public, these characters were homosexual. To gays they represented a pattern of oppression similar to the one suffered by blacks, long typified onscreen as simpletons and domestics” (35). Other types include the lesbian predator, queer buffoons/fools, “buddies” in the buddy film, the gay killer and the gay tragic victim (murdered or a suicide). Russo explores how these stereotypes create a skewed vision of lesbians and gay men and further the disease of homophobia. Russo’s often militant political prose is both a refutation of the hateful depictions and a call-to-action. “The history of the portrayal of lesbians and gay men in mainstream cinema is politically indefensible and aesthetically revolting… Gay visibility has never really been an issue in the movies. Gays have always been visible. It’s how they are visible that has remained offensive for almost a century” (325). In a similar vein, gender-variance, including transgender characters, has often been visible in cinema as well. It’s how they have been visible that has led to stereotypes and limited representations.

I think that these books are both useful to understanding this project. Transgender people have often been shoehorned into certain stereotyped characters types, and these characters overwhelmingly populate the transgender media canon. Like the toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies and bucks of Bogle’s work, as well as the sissies, lesbian predators, tragic victims and vicious victimizers of Russo’s work, I looked across a range of trans
media images to come up with recurring stereotypes of gender-variant characters. I am thankful for the work of authors like Bogle and Russo for providing a genealogy that enables me to build off of their work and apply their frameworks to another stigmatized minority group.

Limitations of Study

While this is a broad study that examines multiple media genres and different historical periods, it is certainly not encyclopedic for a variety of reasons. Firstly, all images examined herein are limited to U.S. productions with few exceptions. In addition, there are more MTF representations than FTM. This is because historically FTMs have been much more marginalized in the media, despite the fact that they are roughly half of the transgender population (Brown and Rounsley 9-10). In addition, this study makes every effort to integrate representational analyses of people of color, although once again we see marginalization in the media. While roughly 25% of all images should be comprised of people of color to be commensurate with their societal population in the U.S., racism, classism, transphobia, heterosexism and ethnocentrism combine to erase the experience of transgender people of color. Sadly, the upper middle-class, white, MTF, post-operative transsexual has been given visibility to the exclusion of FTMs, trans people of color, trans people with disabilities, poor and working-class transgender people, intersex people and non-surgical/non-passing transpeople. Due to these media slights, this study bolsters representations from these groups whenever possible, in order to highlight the genuine diversity found within the gender-variant communities.
Methodology

Cultural Studies is an interdisciplinary and emerging field of study that does not have a single methodology that is clearly and consistently employed. Mimi White and James Schwoch write: “Many scholars celebrate and endorse the free-wheeling and extremely open nature of this area of intellectual pursuit, while others point to this openness as a sign of the relative intellectual weakness of cultural studies” (1). Thus, cultural studies is open to innovative and eclectic usages of theory and method, while at the same time open to criticism from more conservative academicians who may chide the field for its lack of rigor and coherent set of methods. As someone whose background is in women’s studies and American studies, my training has always been interdisciplinary. Thus, I do not approach cultural studies with the unfair skepticism of some discipline-bound purists. However, I do understand the dichotomy at work here, at once freeing but also challenging for its lack of specificity. There is no universal “this is how you do cultural studies” template for students and researchers. On the other hand, this allows for practitioners to experiment and consider a wide range of diverse methodologies. As White and Schwoch contend, a positive feature of cultural studies is that it often engages multiple methodologies for “analyses of meaning and power in everyday cultural practices are advanced by drawing together methodologies from more than one traditional discipline, sometimes in ways that might be perceived as epistemologically antagonistic” (7). Along with openness and freedom comes greater responsibility. Since cultural studies does not possess a discernable universal “method” then it is important for me to be clear about my own methodology for this project.
As I thought about the project, I was confronted with a myriad of questions about both cultural studies and cultural studies methodology. John Hartley nicely summarizes these questions in the following:

As an interdisciplinary colloquy, cultural studies caused continuing methodological turbulence. How to analyze spoken and written language, visual images, and mediated audiovisual sequences for their cultural meanings? How to produce evidence of causal sequence connecting the world of meaning with the world of power? How to connect questions of structure (economy, class, etc.) with questions of agency (individual subjectivity, creativity, etc.)? How to bring to bear on those questions new theoretical, philosophical or political ideas, including feminism, structuralism, post-structuralism, postmodernism, post colonialism?

These were all significant and disputed issues. (71-72)

I knew I wanted to analyze media texts that represent gender variance. But I also knew that I wanted to also link these mediated images to the world at large (the reel/real split). In particular, I wanted to look at power, oppression and cultural hegemony and how these related to trans media images. I also wanted to draw on critical theory and frameworks such as feminism, postmodernism and queer/trans studies. But connecting the dots certainly proved much more difficult than I at first realized. What claims could I assert about the “real world” based on analyses of media texts? If my readings were too strong in identifying instances of transphobic bigotry, was I then not giving enough agency to the audience? If I had a “prescriptive” reading of a particular film, was I being disloyal to postmodernism? Was I simply exchanging my privileged “progressive”
reading for the existing “conservative” representation? How could I talk about media depictions without resorting to notions of “positive” and “negative” images, and how does this relate to my methodology?

While I have not been able to answer all of these questions, they have played an increasingly larger part of my method with each re-write and revision. While I will not be able to answer these dilemmas to each reader’s satisfaction, I do believe that they are issues that have become central to my thinking about method in cultural studies research, particularly the search for cultural meaning in media texts. My primary method for this project is interpretive textual analysis. Saukko writes the following about textual analysis:

The trademark of cultural studies, both in its classic and contemporary form, has been the analysis of texts or discourses, to the point that the paradigm has been accused of a tendency to reduce all social phenomenon into texts. One could say, however, that the specific feature of cultural studies’ approach to texts is that, rather than examining their formal or aesthetic features, the paradigm investigates the way in which cultural texts emerge from, and play a role in, the changing historical, political, and social context. Thus, what characterizes cultural studies’ approach to culture is not ‘textualism’ but ‘contextualism’ (99).

My work is not primarily interested in formal or aesthetic approaches but in the socio-cultural, and especially political, landscape of gender and sexuality in American culture. The texts provide us a handy way to access the cultural codes that frame trans/gender. Although the project borrows from the close textual readings associated
with New Criticism, it departs severely from that school in that historical, social, cultural and political contexts are centrally explored.

My research for this project included watching many more hours of media texts than are included in this project. This gave me a sense of the trans media culture terrain that I was dealing with. I used a series of criteria to choose specific texts I would analyze in depth in the dissertation. Based on this broad viewing, I identified key tropes that emerged again and again in media texts. These tropes are each identified in the following chapters. In order to choose the specific texts I would analyze to illustrate these tropes, I often picked texts that have mass commercial appeal that have not been written about in academic texts. Through drawing on popular cultural texts, my goal is to render these media texts as sites of academic, critical analysis. In addition, I chose texts are good examples of the trope under review; they embody the facets of the stereotyped character that I believe are important to critically analyze.

To conclude this methodology section, I would like to end with an important point. In addition to writing about texts, I am also simultaneously writing a new text. Often, we do not pay attention to the production of our new text since we are so concentrated on writing about other already-existing texts. Alison Lee writes: “All forms of discourse analysis generate texts about texts. Yet the status of discourse analysis as itself writing is problematic. Typically, it seems, the textuality of the object text is foregrounded, while the textuality of the analytic text is not” (197). Thus, while I hope my assertions in this analytic text are convincing and persuasive, it is important to foreground this manuscript as “text” in the same way that the films and television shows I analyze are texts. I anticipate other scholars interrogating this text in the same way that I
have interrogated texts within this dissertation. As Lee states: “Discourse analysts need to be able to account reflexively for the textuality of their own texts” (202).

**Chapter Breakdowns**

Chapters Two through Five are organized around a central stereotype/archetype of transgender representation. These archetypes or cultural codes help to anchor the dissertation and provide a trope to explore as I examine the multiple media texts. The stereotypes/archetypes explored are: the Transgender Deceiver, The Transgender Mammy, the Transgender Monster and the Transgender Revolutionary. The stereotypes/archetypes I chose are far from comprehensive; they are based on my own particular interests and what I see as some of the most pervasive and recurring themes in the transgender media canon.45

Chapter Two examines the Transgender Deceiver. There is a very strong cultural tradition of accusing trans people of being “deceptive.” Critics accuse trans people of attempting to fool and trick others by presenting themselves in a gender role that does not “match” their assigned biological sex. Their assigned sex is seen as their real or true gender, while their gender role presentation is seen as phony fakery, often deployed to lure a gender-normative or heterosexual person into a romantic or sexual situation. A plethora of films utilize impermanent cross-dressing in order for a conventionally gendered person to infiltrate a particular social situation. Chris Straayers names these movies “temporary transvestite” films (42-78).46 I decided to explore four films in depth in order to explore their relationship to the trope of deception. The four films chosen are *Tootsie, Juwanna Mann, Just One of the Guys* and *Sorority Boys*. 
Each of these films is intended as a comedy, and each does indeed deliver some laughs. However, their status as entertainment or as comedies does not undo what I see as some more insidious aspects. The characters in these films disguise themselves as a member of a different gender in order to get something that they want. Although none of the characters identify as transgender per se, the images themselves are still trans images. In analyzing these films, I am interested in attempting to determine some of the cultural codes created by the mass media. As people look at the flickering images on their TV or movie screen, they see a cross-dressed person who is lying, cheating, and being duplicitous to achieve their own self-centered needs. In order to enrich their own lives, these characters utilize temporary gender transformation to infiltrate other people’s social worlds. In the process they create huge emotional turmoil and hurt people quite deeply. However, by the film’s ending, all is forgiven. More importantly, the gender transgression and sexual innuendo which has been whipped into a frenzy during the movie is quickly terminated by the film’s end. In the final outcome, gender and sexual normalcy are faithfully restored. In the reel world, cross-dressing is simply a masquerade, a ruse to achieve desired ends. In short, it is being who you are not in order to get what you want. And in the final analysis, there are no negative outcomes; in fact, the main character learns an important lesson and strengthens emotional bonds with other people.

However, in the real world, things work quite differently. Transgender people pay, sometimes with their lives, for simply being who they are. And often, society blames transgender people for bringing misery or death upon themselves because they have tricked, deceived, or lied about their “true” identity.\textsuperscript{47} The stark reality is that trans
people often lose everything when they come out as who they are, and they do not
magically transform into a cisgender, heterosexual person as the characters do at the end
of the movies. They must live out their lives as a gender-variant person, and face all the
penalties that come with it.

Chapter Three examines the representation of what I term Transgender Mammies
in films such as To Wong Foo, Flawless, and Holiday Heart. The chapter examines the
development of drag queen and transgender stock characters that have a bundle of
stereotypic traits in common: being angelic, more spiritual than average, rehabilitators,
advice givers, best pals, side-kicks, sassy queens and sexually dysfunctional beings.
These films are characterized by entrenched stereotyping, selflessness to the point of self-
abnegation, and allegiance to patriarchy, heteronormativity and narrow, prescribed roles.
The drag/trans representations as best pals, rehabilitators and new-age spiritual gurus all
place the characters in narrowly defined positions as “othered” objects rather than fully
constituted subjects. While some characters are more fully realized than others, and
several are perhaps likable, the films are clearly presented for the entertainment and
edification of mainstream, straight audiences, and they often present misleading or
inaccurate information about queer, drag and transgender identities. The Transgender
Mammy figure improves the sex lives, spiritual awareness, families, and relationships of
those who surround her, but basically has no life of her own. This chapter explores why
this is so problematic and why films that purport to be liberal must be deconstructed and
taken to task for the ways in which they reinforce dominant social relations.

As I will discuss in the chapter, I struggled with using the term “mammy” because
it has very specific meanings in the pantheon of American history and popular culture.
The Transgender Mammies that I discuss are not identical to the Black Mammies that populate the racist imagination. However, as will be discussed, they do share several traits despite their very different points in culture and history. In order to optimally understand both types of mammies, they must be analyzed with regards to race, gender, class, and sexuality, as these intersecting categories meet on the surface of their bodies. Further, they must be understood as distorted projections that emanate from the authorial biases of those in positions of power. Mammies, and other hegemonically-constructed personages that populate American popular culture, function to reveal nothing about oppressed minority groups. They do, however, reveal something about the white and gender-normative people who create, maintain and celebrate them. I would also argue that trans people are often falsely viewed by the majority as entertainers, and that this dyadic relationship contributes to the formulation and perpetuation of the Transgender Mammy stereotype.

Chapter Four’s theme is Transgender Monsters and deals with gender diversity as a threatening form of criminality. Many have heard of “driving while black,” or “flying while Arab,” however, few have heard the statement “walking while trans.” Since gender transgression is so taboo in our culture, it is not surprising that it is often linked to criminality, sociopathic behavior and delinquency. Until recently, just to “be” transgender could often be against the law, or put one in danger of being rounded up in a paddy wagon and thrown behind bars.

The transgender killer is the abject, the grotesque and the monstrous all rolled up into one. If trans people are not tragic victims or the butt of jokes, then frequently they are cast as vicious killers. While trans people are being killed in hate crimes all over the
globe, movies show trans people being killers, a bald-faced reversal of reality. Much of this stems from the real-life killer Ed Gein, which formed the basis for many of the slasher films. Producers have often copied the original slasher film *Psycho*. In order to understand this phenomenon, one can use the work of Carol Clover and other feminist critics. On a simpler level, the persistence and popularity of these films points out that gender transgression in and of itself continues to be horrifying, shocking and equated with sociopathic and psychotic behavior. In addition to the crime of murder, trans people have been represented as other types of criminals. Of course, in the real world, some trans people *are* criminals, but it is not my task to assert whether or not trans criminals should be portrayed. Instead, I am interested in why so many *are* portrayed, and why there is a cultural linkage made between atypical gender identity/expression and monstrosity. I briefly trace some of the history regarding horror films and note the transformation from human/animal monstrosity to monsters predicated on disruptions to sex and gender normalcy.

To explore trans monstrosity, the chapter looks at three teen/young adult slasher films: *Terror Train*, *Sleepaway Camp* and *Cherry Falls*. While I do not delve much into the use of psychoanalysis in my critiques, these films are ripe for a psycho-social analysis. It is my contention that just as assertive female sexuality must often be punished in these films, non-normative male-bodied genders and sexualities are the ultimate threat and must be virulently demonized. While there may be some small pity for the female victims, the queer/trans killers lose any such sympathy by virtue of their positioning as vicious killers; their deaths are joyfully relished.
Chapter Five is entitled “Transgender Revolutionaries” and it examines four documentary films: *Toilet Training*, *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton’s Cafeteria*, *Fenced Out*, and *Cruel and Unusual*. While the previous three chapters often paint a bleak picture in terms of trans images, these films can only be called revolutionary in terms of what they achieve. These films constitute what I term a “new wave” in transgender documentary films. The representation of trans subjectivity in these fresh documentaries is innovative for multiple reasons.

Earlier trans documentaries often featured trans people as tragic victims and as circus sideshows. There was usually a level of exploitation and sensationalism that hung to the trans subjects being portrayed. In addition, many trans documentaries have been what might be termed “procedurals”; they focused so much on the physical transition (hormones, legal name and gender change, surgeries etc.) that they never presented, or portrayed, a more intimate account of the person’s life or of the cultural, social, political and economic environments in which they live. They also often tended towards sexual exploitation and showed the trans person dutifully obeying the “standards of care” of various legal, psychiatric, medical and surgical gatekeepers.

Films such as the ones in the “new wave” arrest the image of the trans victim and the sex-change “freak.” Most importantly, they portray trans people as agents of social change. Trans people depicted wielding their agency is a veritable breakthrough in filmic representation. Trans people have often been portrayed as the dupes of gender or as obedient persons who do what their psychiatric and medical “experts” tell them to. In these films, trans activism and social change efforts are centrally portrayed. In addition, by representing issues such as restroom access, prisoner rights, gentrification and police
brutality, the films function to place trans subjectivity in a larger cultural context. Trans identity (what it is, what it entails) is taken for granted. So many films, including documentaries, continue to be vehicles for explaining the causation of transsexualism, or trying to justify their right to exist. But this new wave of documentary helps to take these issues a step further by widening and complicating trans people and trans rights. For instance, how does the existence of trans people complicate the current organization of public restrooms and prisons, not just for that minority of people labeled “trans” but for all people? Part of the marginalization of trans people in society has long been that it is seen as a tiny minority of people who exist at the periphery of a culture that does not affect “normal” people. But these films help to shift that notion by both insisting on the shared humanity of trans people and demanding that cisgender people recognize that trans issues are their issues, too.

Chapter Six is the concluding chapter of the dissertation. In addition to summarizing the findings of the previous chapters, the main goals of the chapter are twofold. Firstly, I revisit some of the central theoretical tensions of this dissertation, the questions of media, postmodernism, queer theory and social change. I examine changes in media culture and technology that will enable greater participation in media production. Secondly, I chart the possible future of media and its role in documenting revolutionary changes to the current paradigm of gender and sexuality. Are media keeping pace with advances in the transgender community? Can media be more widely used to promote progressive change?

Now that we have a road map for the contents of this dissertation, let us begin the journey to look at gender variance in both the “reel” and the “real” worlds.
1 Certainly, there was agitation for transgender rights in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. In fact, in Chapter 5, I will discuss the film *Screaming Queens*, which researches a rebellion by trans people against oppressive police in 1966. While the transgender struggles of these times are vitally important, the 1990s truly saw the emergence of a more large-scale and organized movement for transgender liberation. While the gay movement’s watershed was the 1969 Stonewall riot, transgender people lag behind gays and lesbians by up to two decades in terms of civil rights and social acceptance. For books that chronicle the 1990s transgender emergence, see *Transgender Warriors* by Leslie Feinberg, *Gender Outlaw* by Kate Bornstein, *Read My Lips* by Riki Wilchins, and *The Apartheid of Sex* by Martine Rothblatt, among others.

2 By this I simply mean that there is no universal meaning attached to a text; viewers construct differing meanings based on their social location/identities, political orientation and lived experiences.


4 When I “came out” in the early 1990s, the transgender community was still often termed the TV/TS (transvestite/transsexual) community. If one was gender-variant, one was presumed to be either a cross-dresser who dressed up for fun on a part-time basis or a transsexual who sought or had already had sex reassignment surgery. The transgender revolution helped to spur on an awareness of many different options, including living full-time in congruence with one’s gender identity but not getting surgery, or switching back and forth between genders or not identifying as male or female at all.

5 Dr. Virginia Prince was an important pioneer in the transgender community, albeit a very controversial personality. Prince was particularly important for her work to help educate society about heterosexual male cross-dressers and their wives, a previously hidden and underground population. Her history of homophobia and disapproval of sex reassignment surgery enraged her critics. For a full-length biography of Virginia Prince’s life, see: *From Man to Woman: The Transgender Journey of Virginia Prince* by Richard Docter. See also: *Virginia Prince: Pioneer of Transgendering* Edited by Richard Ekins and Dave King.

6 Kate Bornstein talks about this phenomenon in her book *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us* (p. 62-65). In addition, Sandy Stone brilliantly interrogates the psychological and psychiatric establishment for their role in preserving oppressive gendered practices in her essay “The Empire Strikes Back: A Post-Transsexual Manifesto.” Many consider Stone’s essay to be one of the core, foundational works in the field of transgender studies.

7 One person that lived “stealth” for several decades is electrical engineer and professor emerita Lynn Conway. In order to achieve the level of success that she did, it would have been impossible for Conway to live openly as a transsexual woman. However, upon her retirement, Conway bravely stepped forward as a transsexual and created the website www.lynnconway.com to help future generations of trans people. For a full account of Conway’s life history, see Michael Hiltzik’s “Through the Gender Labyrinth.”

8 For some transpeople, of course, passing is still very important, and some may choose to live (more or less) stealthy lives. However, what has changed is the requirement that you must pass and blend seamlessly into the woodwork. Some transsexuals such as Leslie Townsend consider their stealth lives a “hollow victory” and reconnect with trans community after years of woodworking. Townsend discusses this in the documentary film *Beautiful Daughters*.

9 Hir is a gender-neutral pronoun. I will use gender-neutral pronouns such as s/he, ze, and hir throughout the dissertation for cases where I think they are most appropriate. Many people’s gender identities and expressions are complex and do not fit neatly into binary categories of “he” or “she.” In addition, sometimes it is not possible to know or ascertain a person’s pronoun preference. Gender-neutral pronouns will be utilized in these cases to promote sensitivity and diversity for a person’s unique gendered location. Two of the first people in the trans community to publicize the use of gender-neutral pronouns were Kate Bornstein and Leslie Feinberg.
For more on cross-dressing and drag on stage throughout history, please see Peter Ackroyd’s *Dressing Up: Transvestism and Drag, The History of an Obsession* and Roger Baker’s *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation in the Performing Arts.*

For more on drag kinging, please see: De l. LaGrace Volcano and Judith Halberstam’s *The Drag King Book and The Drag King Anthology* edited by Donna Troka, Kathleen Lebesco and Jean Noble. For more about drag queen identities, see *The Drag Queen Anthology*, edited by Steven Schacht and Lisa Underwood. For a contemporary ethnography of drag queen culture, see Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor’s *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret.* For a historical ethnography of female impersonators, see Esther Newton’s *Mother Camp.*

For more information about *A Florida Enchantment,* please see Chapter Two (“The Queer Career of Jim Crow: Racial and Sexual Transformation in Early Cinema”) in Siobhan Somerville’s *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture.*

There are too many such texts to list here, but some earlier transsexual autobiographies include: Jan Morris’s *Conundrum* (1974), Canary Conn’s *Canary: The Story of a Transsexual* (1974), one of the only early FTM autobiographies, Mario Martino’s *Emergence* (1977) and Nancy Hunt’s *Mirror Images* (1978).

I believe that the popularity of transsexual autobiography had an effect upon media representations. In addition to the fact that autobiographies like those of Jorgensen and Richards were turned into biopics, this trend help to forward a certain representational style and claim to authenticity. Audiences were fascinated by individual transsexual’s life stories, which focused on the personal and the micro-level experience. This deflected attention away from macro-level concerns about U.S. society, gender constructions and transphobic oppression.

The fact that the show was a daytime show, however, meant that it did not garner equal viewership from all parts of the family and society. Stay-at-home moms and housewives made up a greater share of the audience for these shows since many men were working outside of the home when these shows aired. In addition, young people were often at school, not allowed to view such issues on TV by parents, or too young to fully understand the implications of gender and sexual diversity. The greater numbers of stay-at-home dads and women working outside the home has changed some of this in more recent years.

For an excellent discussion of the representation of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in television talk shows, see *Freaks Talk back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity* by Joshua Gamson.


See the following *All in the Family* episodes: “Archie, the Hero” (9/29/75); “Beverly Rides Again” (11/6/76); “Edith’s Crisis of Faith-Two Parter” (12/25/77).

See The *Jeffersons* episode “Once a Friend” (10/1/77).

See the *Night Court* episode “Best of Friends” (11/7/85).


See The *Drew Carey Show* episode “Drew’s Brother” (11/19/97). Drew’s brother Steve, a cross-dresser, also appeared in later episodes such as “Steve and Mimi” (3/24/99).

See the episode of with guest star RuPaul: *In the House,* “Boyz II Men II Women” (12/4/95).

Becker “He Said, She Said” (11/1/99).

*Just Shoot Me* “Brandi, You’re a Fine Girl” (11/16/00).

Sheryl Lee Ralph portrayed post-operative transsexual woman Claire in the short-lived Showtime series *Barbershop.* Series character Eddie starts to date Claire and discovers she is a transsexual in the episode “Whose Pussy is That?” (9/4/05).

For examples of sociological studies of transgender people, see: *Honey, Honey, Miss Thang: Being Black, Gay and on the Streets* by Leon Pettway; *Transvestites and Transsexuals: Mixed Views* by Deborah Feinbloom; and *In Search of Eve: Transsexual Rites of Passage* by Anne Bolin.

For examples of literary studies which examine transgender people, see *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* by Marjorie Garber; *Dissenting Fictions: Identity and Resistance in the Contemporary American Novel* by Cathy Moses; “Gender Identity and Narrative Truth: An Autobiographical Approach to Bias” by Anthony Consiglio; “Amazon and Androgynes: Overcivilization and the Redefinition of Gender Roles at the Turn of the Century” by Christopher Den Tandt; and my 2002
Master’s Thesis “Revolutionizing Gender Expression: An Exploration of Passing In Leslie Feinberg’s Stone Butch Blues.”

29 There are many books and articles that examine gender-variance in cross-cultural contexts. Some examples are: Travesti: Sex, Gender and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes by Don Kulick; Mema’s House, Mexico City: On Transvestites, Queens, and Machos by Annick Prieur; Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India by Serena Nanda; and The Third Sex: Kathoey: Thailand’s Ladyboys by Richard Totman.

30 There is a growing body of social work research emerging which deals with the transgender experience. Gerald Mallon’s edited collection Social Services with Transgendered Youth and the article “Bending Gender, Ending Gender: Theoretical Foundations for Social Work Practice with the Transgender Community” by Barb J. Burdge are two good examples.

31 Examples of resources about counseling the trans community include the article I co-wrote with Lynne Carroll and Paula Gilroy entitled “Counseling Transgendered, Transsexual, and Gender-Variant Clients,” as well as the following books: Transgender Care: Recommended Guidelines, Practical Information and Personal Accounts by Gianna Israel and Donald Tarver, Transgender Emergence: Therapeutic Guidelines for Working with Gender-Variant People and their Families by Arlene Istar Lev, Counseling Sexual and Gender Minorities by Lynne Carroll and Gender Loving Care: A Guide to Counseling Gender-Variant Clients by Randi Ettna.

32 There are a number of books of photography featuring transgender subjects, but three of the most important photographers chronicling the gender-variant community are Mariette Pathy Allen’s Transformations: Cross-Dressers and Those Who Love Them and The Gender Frontier; Loren Cameron’s Body Alchemy and Del LaGrace Volcano’s The Drag King Book and Sublime Mutations.

33 The term cissexual or cisgender refer to non-transsexual or non-transgender people. The term comes from the field of chemistry to refer to molecules that stay on the same side (cis-) versus those that cross over (trans-). The term is quickly becoming preferable to older terms for non-transsexuals, such as “genetic,” “biological,” “natal,” or “real.”

34 This list has become a classic in trans studies and is a very important document in our collective liberation as a community. It contains 15 suggested rules that cover many of the ethics of doing responsible research with or about the trans community. See “Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans ____” by Jacob Hale. Available online at: http://sandystone.com/hale.rules.html

35 For an excellent primer on the issue of transfeminism and its important contribution to feminist theory and activism, I recommend reading “The Transfeminist Manifesto” by Emi Koyama.

36 The architect of anti-trans feminism is former U-Mass Amherst Women’s Studies professor Janice Raymond, who penned The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male, originally as a dissertation under lesbian separatist advisor Mary Daly. Feminists critical of transsexuality and transgenderism have continued to publish their work. Examples include: Unpacking Queer Politics: A Lesbian Feminist Perspective by Sheila Jeffrey, Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender by Bernice Hausman, and The Whole Woman by Germaine Greer.

37 For instance, some women’s studies practitioners may take “woman” as a stable, coherent and universal subject of analysis, while trans studies may radically deconstruct such categorizations, which gives the two fields wildly different points of departure. Women’s studies has been criticized for centering the experiences of white, able-bodied and middle-class females to the exclusion of women of color, disabled women and poor and working-class women. Trans women are now also sounding the alarm and demanding that women’s studies (and gender studies) begin to account for their unique experiences, knowledge and theories.

38 See What a Drag: Men as Women and Women as Men in the Movies by Homer Dickens; Hollywood Drag by J.C. Suarès; and Ladies or Gentlemen: A Pictorial History of Male Cross-Dressing in the Movies Jean-Louis Ginibre.

39 While most people are familiar with drag queens, many are unfamiliar with the term drag king. Defining the term is not easy, but it generally refers to a female-bodied person who explores constructions of maleness or masculinity in performance contexts such as nightclubs, theater or entertainment venues. Drag kining gained greater popularity in the 1990s through the present, particularly in large, urban, lesbian communities.
I would like to note, however, that although I agree with Butler’s assertions regarding the basically identical nature of “sex” and “gender,” I still find differentiating the terms useful from a pedagogical perspective. For people who have never thought through or deconstructed gender issues in a critical manner, it is useful for them to understand the physical (sex) versus the socio-cultural (gender) to begin to interrogate these concepts. Butler’s sophisticated position is better understood once people understood how terms like sex and gender have been epistemologically deployed.

A disturbing historical episode of this trend occurred at the 1973 NYC Pride parade when lesbian-feminist Jean O’Leary viciously rebuked Stonewall Warrior Sylvia Rivera from the stage for the way in which she believed Sylvia’s gender-variance was an affront to women. For an account of this incident and Sylvia’s life, see the excellent article: “Sylvia Rivera: Fighting in Her Heels: Stonewall, Civil Rights, and Liberation” by Layli Phillips and Shomari Olugbala.

Several books about autoethnography include: Autoethnography as Method by Heewon V. Chang; Auto-Ethnographies: The Anthropology of Academic Practices by Anne Meneley and Donna J. Young; A Delicate Dance : Autoethnography, Curriculum, and the Semblance of Intimacy by Laura M. Jewett.

Bornstein states: “gender is a means by which we establish traction in the world. When you meet somebody, how do you know what ground you stand on?...the word ‘attraction’ includes the word traction. So it’s a way to establish ground, to get to know somebody. Unfortunately, it’s become a way to permanently relate with somebody...So gender is convenient, but like most convenient things, it becomes its own trap.” For more of the interview, see: Bernstein, Robin. “The Question of Gender: An Interview with Kate Bornstein.” Boston: Sojourner Newspaper, 1996.

For an overview of some of the problems which plague the transgender community, see: Transgender Rights, edited by Paisley Currah, Richard Juang and Shannon Minter and Transgender Care, edited by Gianna Israel and Donald Tarver. For a great primer on issues affecting trans youth, see: Transparent: Love, Family and Living the Truth with Transgender Teenagers by Cris Beam.

A few other examples of archetypes that are not contained in the dissertation are: The Transgender Transnationalist, which describes films that feature gender-variant people in diverse cultural and geographic regions, as well as the traversing trans person who crosses national borders in tandem with the crossing of gender and sexuality borders. The Transgender “She-Male” refers to the persistent image of pre-operative transsexuals in pornographic texts. The Transgender Sex Worker refers to non-pornographic films that feature trans women as strippers, prostitutes and nude models. The Transgender Joke references films which feature trans people fleetingly as the punch line of a joke, degraded to bolster someone else’s sense of gender normalcy.

Brandon Teena was raped and murdered in Nebraska for being transgender. When Brandon’s mother filed a civil suit, the judge, Orville Coady made a startling ruling in the case when he ruled Brandon 1% responsible for bringing on his own death. Sadly, this is just the tip of the iceberg. In case after case, defense attorneys have introduced “trans panic” defense strategies to exonerate their clients. In this ideology, they make the claim that their client cannot be held fully accountable for murdering a transgender woman because she “lied” about her “true” (i.e. assigned biological sex) gender and what would any red-blooded, heterosexual man do in such a case? This defense is often used if sex occurred between the perpetrator and the transgender woman because it furthers the specious notion that the man was “deceived” and forced into homosexual [sic] sex because he did not know that the woman was transgender. Transphobia, homophobia and misogyny combine to create sympathy for the perpetrator and vilify and demonize the trans victim. In many ways, this is similar to female rape victims who are blamed for being sexually assaulted due to the way they were dressed or acted.

This point was driven home to me personally when I walking in a large department store the day after Halloween. A young woman who worked in the store came up to me and exclaimed that she had seen me the night before. I did not recognize her and asked her where she had seen me. She replied that she had seen me performing at a drag bar Halloween Ball in a nearby city. At the time, I had never set foot in that bar. When I said that I had not been there, she resisted me and insisted that it was me, but then relented and said it was someone that looked like me and walked away, with no apology. While I do not attribute malice to her words, I was momentarily stunned to be so thoroughly stereotyped. As simply a transgender woman walking through a store, I was assumed to be a drag queen performer. In panels that I have been
on, people are often surprised that I am training to be a professor, and admit that their stereotyped views of
us are as drag queens, adult entertainers and hairdressers. Sadly, this view is echoed by academics such as
J. Michael Bailey, author of *The Man Who Would Be Queen*, who repeat such baseless stereotypes and try
to give it the veneer of science and scholarly research.

49 Even in recent times, transgender women simply walking the streets in New York City have been
arrested by police on suspicion of prostitution. This shows the way that trans women are overly sexualized
in our culture and profiled reflexively as sex workers or criminals. For more on “Walking-while trans”, see
more on the sexualization of trans women, see Julia Serano’s “Trans-Sexualization” which is contained in
her collection *Whipping Girl* (p. 253).

50 Historically, cross-dressing was against the law in the United States. Drag queens, cross-dressers and
transgender women could be picked up by cops for the “crime” of appearing in clothes that did not match
their assigned, biological sex. Gay bars were frequently raided by police prior to the Stonewall Rebellion,
and transgender people were often the most viciously targeted and harassed. There was a rule that stated
they needed to be wearing three pieces of clothing appropriate to their sex. For an excellent documentary
that explores these issues, see Susan Stryker’s and Victor Silverman’s film *Screaming Queens: The Riot at
Compton’s Cafeteria*, which is also discussed in Chapter Five. A narrative film that explores this time
period is Nigel Finch’s *Stonewall*.

51 For more on gender and horror films, see: Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror
Film by Carol Clover; The Dread of Difference: Gender in the Horror Film, edited by Barry Keith Grant;
The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis by Barbara Creed; Recreational Terror:
Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing by Isabel Cristina Pinedo ; and The Naked and the
Undead by Cynthia Freeland.
CHAPTER TWO:

TRANSGENDER DECEIVERS: BEING WHAT YOU ARE NOT TO GET WHAT YOU WANT

In 1959, Billy Wilder made the film *Some Like it Hot*, starring Jack Lemmon, Tony Curtis and Marilyn Monroe. The film follows two men who play in a dance band and become unwilling witnesses to a Mafia killing. They are now in danger and need to protect themselves, so they decide to join an all-female band by donning drag. This “cross-dressing caper” or gender masquerade allows them their safety. Although some warned Wilder that the idea was too thin to expand into a feature-length motion picture, he ignored their advice and went on to produce a wildly successful movie. Gender deception, although comically portrayed, is an important trope within the film’s text.

Since then, there has been a plethora of films that use gender disguise and deception as a comedic device. Usually these involve protagonists gaining something through their gender masquerades. That these characters are not explicitly trans, as is seen elsewhere in this dissertation, is not important. Rather than show, or display an interest in identity politics, I am more interested in studying and analyzing *trans images*, those flickering moments on the big or small screen whereby cross-dressing and gender transformation are deployed. How are these images made sense of by those entrenched in the lived identities and ideologies of patriarchal, heterosexist, gender-normativity?

Cross-dressing, as we see in several genres, is often played for laughs in the movies and on TV. This functions as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, these images can function to problematize the socially-constructed gender roles we live with in
our society. They can playfully deconstruct these roles to help reveal to people their more ridiculous aspects, cajoling viewers to challenge some of their most entrenched gender and sexual ideologies. On the other hand, these comedic gender transformations often function to reproduce transphobia, misogyny and heterosexism. By placing cross-dressing and transgenderism in such an only-for-laughs context, it cheapens and degrades people who are struggling to survive at the margins of gender and sexuality.

The production and dissemination of these images does not occur in a socio-cultural vacuum. Often, the producers of these images seem oblivious to the fact that this is not just dress-up time for a sizeable minority of people in the U.S. How do these images of non-trans people relate to the lived experiences of transgender and transsexual people? One might wonder: since the characters are not actually transgender, but merely cisgender people pretending to be the “opposite” sex, how does this potentially affect actual trans people and why does it matter?

One of the claims I would like to assert in this chapter is that these films, perhaps unwittingly, function to reinforce the already-circulating stereotype of the transgender person as deceptive, as an interloper and as so self-obsessed that they are callous towards the needs and emotions of their fellow human beings. As in Chapter Four, where transgender people are presented as monsters, whether or not the character identifies or is culturally classifiable as “transgender” is mostly a moot point. Images do not function in such a simplistic manner\(^1\) in terms of their circulation and the way that they help to construct hegemonic ideology. The gender transformations of these characters in comedies help to create and solidify a view of those who cross, transgress, or straddle the socially-constructed lines of gender in our society. Before turning to a discussion of
films, I would like to examine the stereotype of the deceiver, and then explore some examples of this in television culture.

Deception is the act of misleading someone through proffering inaccurate information or through misrepresenting one’s self. Lying is the hallmark of deception. Charles Ford describes many different types of lies, including altruistic lies, defensive lies and pathological lies (30-31). The type of lies most significant to this discussion are known as “aggressive lies.” “Aggressive lies are told in an effort to hurt someone else or to gain an advantage for oneself…Aggressive lies are self-serving and may potentially damage others, and therefore, most people would see them as clearly immoral” (emphasis mine, 31). The characters in the films discussed below tell “aggressive lies” to gain various advantages for themselves. Sadly, the deceitful actions of these cissexual actors bleed into pre-circulating discourses of trans people as deceptive.

The patriarchal matrix of sex, gender and desire insists on a sort of universal order and coherence. Within this system, the presence of a penis signifies that a person is male; that male person is expected to grow up and embody a “masculine” gender expression and be exclusively attracted to “feminine” cissexual females. This gender and heteronormative framework perpetuates a stable and fixed relationship between bodily surface, communication of gender and sexual object choice. In actuality, all levels of this matrix contain multiple diverse possibilities, including intersexuality, transgenderism and queerness. Trans people potentially “queer” all three levels (sex, gender and sexual orientation) of this supposedly universal and stable matrix. Let us take the example of a pre-operative (or non-operative), heterosexual-identified transgender/transsexual woman. This individual typically would be assigned male at birth based on the presence of a
penis. Unbeknownst to family and friends, however, their core gender identity is female. When they “transition” as a trans girl or woman, they will typically begin expressing a more “feminine” gender communication through altering culturally-bound representational cues of gender such as clothing, hairstyle, cosmetics etc. They will probably change their name and may begin contra-gender hormonal therapy to make their body more congruent with their identity. In dating and sexuality, they are primarily or exclusively attracted to men and consider themselves as a woman in a relationship with a man (heterosexual). While this sketch is obviously simplified, it is fairly typical for some straight-identified trans women and follows a clear and comprehensible trajectory. However, given the gender training of dominant society, the above sketch is often incomprehensible, unintelligible and downright threatening, particularly to gender-normative, heterosexual people.

Given the often limited paradigm that most people learn about gender and sexuality in this culture, exceptions to the rule of sex-gender normalcy are often cast as aberrations or freaks, as deviant bodies and desires that refuse to conform to the dictates of hegemonic patriarchy. It is my assertion that the transgender body, which mixes signifiers in unique and sometimes startling ways, is hegemonically constructed as always already deceptive and duplicitous. To many societal actors, the transgender body “lies” because of its perceived disunity between bodily surface, gender expression and erotic interest. Given its communication of “feminine” gender, those attributing a gender based on visual consumption, are shocked to discover sexual signifiers they associate with maleness or masculinity. This is further compounded by the trans person exhibiting sexual or romantic interest in persons that are deemed “out of bounds.” From the
perspective of the hegemonic understanding of sex, gender and sexuality, the sexually-desiring trans body is categorically “wrong.” Since it is impossible to shoehorn this gender-variant body into preexisting modalities that square with sites of dominant, oppressive knowledge, it is necessary to construct alternate modes of epistemology. Sadly, rather than create a model of diversity and celebration of difference, many construct a negative reality for the trans body that fits with stereotypical ideations. It seems that a common maneuver is to construct the trans body as deceptive due to its failure to be easily placed in the patriarchal system of sex, gender and desire. As Talia Mae Bettcher writes: “the deceiver representation (with its related identity enforcement) in and of itself constitutes considerable emotional violence against transpeople through its impeachment of moral integrity and denials of authenticity” (47). The trans body, constructed as inauthentic, is not only talked about in hostile ways; often the agents of these discourses ratchet up the situation by resorting to physical assault and murder.

This trope of deception has serious, corporeal ramifications for members of the transgender community. If one examines many of the most vicious hate crimes directed against transgender people, they often involve straight-identified men who discover that the trans woman they have had sex with is anatomically male. This “freak-out” is often accompanied by de-panting and sex verification, shouting, violence and sometimes murder. Rather than place the blame squarely on the shoulders of the perpetrator, defense lawyers in such murder cases frequently attempt to exonerate their clients of criminal wrongdoing through mounting a defense based on “gay panic” or “trans panic.” Essentially, this defense states that their all-American, red-blooded, masculine and heterosexual male client was driven to kill because he had been deceived and trapped in a
situation of forced homosexualization. While attempting to engage in “normal” heterosexual sex, he finds out either during or after the act that the object of his lust is an anatomical male. He then goes into a state of panic because his masculinity and devout heterosexuality have been challenged by this transgressive, lying and deceptive partner. He is driven into a psychological panic/rage to kill the offending party in order to restore his own sense of normality. Ultimately, the blame is shifted from the hands of the perpetrator to the implied lying, deceptive and immoral behaviors of the victim. As in court cases where the rapist and the rape victim are of normative gender, the victim is often blamed for bringing on an assault by the way she dresses or by the company she keeps; here, the blame is moved to the trans victim for bringing on her own injury or death through acts which encourage, in normative men, the need to maim or kill in order to restore their place within patriarchal culture.  

For many years I have sat on transgender educational panels for classes, social service agencies and community groups. During the Q&A sections of these panels, a familiar refrain is often heard. People, most especially young men, raise the specter of deception. “Don’t you think it is unfair and dangerous for transgender women to lie to the men they date and have sex with? Isn’t that ethically wrong?” It is difficult to answer this in a sound-bite fashion because it is an incredibly complex question. I try to unpack it but fear I do not do the question justice because of its complexity. Generally, I state that, first of all, the idea that trans women do not tell their partners is usually not true. The media stereotype needs to be understood and challenged for the way it often transmits unfair and inaccurate information. Secondly, what is it that the trans woman is “lying” about? If they identify as women, they are women. To state otherwise is to
delegitimize the very identities of trans women as women. Now, if you are talking about the fact that they were not born “biologically” female, why does one assume that it is his (the male partner) “right” to know that information right away? If transsexualism is understood as an unchosen medical condition that a certain segment of the population experiences, does a first date have the “right” to know that? What other “secrets,” including medical conditions, are not shared right away by one or both parties? In my opinion, trans people should share their status relatively early in the relationship to avoid some of the strain that some people, particularly men, seem to experience. But I also understand that when trans people share their identity right away, they are almost always rejected. Transphobia is so pervasive in our society that most people will not give a trans person a chance in a dating situation. Undoubtedly, many trans people have learned this and attempt to get their partner to know them as people (as opposed to only as transsexuals) in order to secure a better shot at a long-term relationship. Whether, or when, to tell is surely an interesting and thorny ethical issue. But why is the complete responsibility placed on the shoulders of the trans person? Could cisgender people dating trans people ever assume that maybe their date or partner has a more complex gender identity/expression than is revealed at first glance? As Julia Serano writes in Feministing: “Few attempts to blame the victim are more blatant than when trans people are accused of ‘sexual deceit’ or ‘sexual assault’ simply because other people have chosen to express their attraction toward us. In reality, it is they who are guilty of cissexual/cisgender assumption (when one presumes that every person they meet is non-trans by default). Trans people simply exist, we are everywhere, and the rest of the world has to start recognizing and accepting that.”
Perhaps most importantly, this emphasis on deception fuels the notion that trans people’s lives are inherently inauthentic. No matter how hard trans people try to be accepted in accordance with their gender identification, hegemonic societal forces always try to shoehorn them back into compliance with their assigned gender. “She’s really a man” or “He’s really a woman” denote that no matter how you identify or how much you physically transition, you are what you were born, period. Trans people who attempt to convince the world otherwise are engaging in “deceptive” practices. Further, according to this logic they are attempting to get something they do not deserve: MTFs are “really” feminine gay men in denial who are trying to snag a “real” straight man, or they are attempting to appropriate the special features of femininity that are solely the province of natal women, or they are uncomfortable being in the gray zone of gender-variance and are “selling out” to be part of the gender establishment, etc. Conversely, FTMs are cast as trying to cash in on male privilege. This could mean earning more money at their jobs, or acquiring a “real” feminine, heterosexual partner. In addition, some may see it as a denial of their lesbianism and butchness and an inability to deal with the oppression that females and lesbians face under patriarchy.

In her essay “Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion,” Talia Mae Bettcher examines deception in relation to transphobia and hate violence committed against gender-variant people. She asserts that the stereotype of trans people as deceptive is a common one and that this stereotype contributes to hate and violence against the trans community.

Rage at having ‘been deceived’ may play a role in some transphobic hostility, interwoven, of course, with homophobic and possibly sexist
attitudes. More generally, the persistent stereotype of transpeople as deceivers and the equation of deception with rape need explanation. In addition to contributing to transphobic hostility, the stereotype plays a significant role in blame-shifting discourse that can be deployed to justify or excuse violence against transpeople. (47)

In her article, Bettcher quotes a newspaper writer who states that hate crime victim Gwen Araujo was killed by the men whom she “raped” by virtue of not informing them that she was biologically male when they had consensual sex with her (44). After her death, Araujo is both turned into a “rapist” and blamed for inciting the rage of young, heterosexual men by deceiving them about her birth sex. The cultural violence which is committed against the trans body does not end at the time of the homicide. In actuality, the violence continues and transforms, moving from the corporeal violence to the realm of discursive violence. Like the rape victim who is physically and psychologically harmed through sexual assault, the assault upon her continues through to the discursive violence which assaults her character and personhood long after the committal of the original rape. Before discussing the trope of deception in the films, let us first discuss these issues as they occur in some televisual examples.

Daytime television talk shows6 abound with images of transgender people as deceptive. Transgender people are repeatedly shown as liars who deceive others about their identities in order to get what they want. In particular, shows like The Jerry Springer Show present trans women as freakish caricatures who are obsessed with “tricking” straight men to form relationships with them or get them into bed. The most frequently used trope is trans women declaring their trans status to supposedly
unsuspecting boyfriends.\textsuperscript{7} In these highly scripted and bizarre episodes, a trans woman is paraded on stage and presented as a highly unlikable personality.\textsuperscript{8} They then bring on her boyfriend who is told that she is “really” a guy or a man. The audience reacts with a horrified expression and sympathy for the pitiable, gender-normative, straight male, whose very masculinity has been called into question by this lying, deceiving “she-male.” It is not atypical for the audience to chant “You’re a Man” or other offensive phrases at the transsexual spectacle before them. While Jerry Springer and his show’s producers would likely assert that this is all in fun, the impact of these programs on society’s attitudes remains an open question.\textsuperscript{9}

Firstly, trans women’s identities are seen as inherently fraudulent. However they present or identify or whether they have had surgery or not, in Jerry Springer-land MTF transsexuals are men, plain and simple. In addition, they are gay men who are utilizing a feminine appearance to lure masculine, straight men into their shadowy queer underworld. These straight men are presented as victims who have been duped by a duplicitous “she-male” who uses her outward trappings of femininity to lure him into a non-normative relationship. The audience seems utterly uninterested in the multiple layers of oppression that these trans women (often of color, often economically challenged) face in white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal America.\textsuperscript{10} The gender-normative, “heterosexual” man is transformed into the victim, fulfilling what Mary Daly refers to as a patriarchal reversal.\textsuperscript{11} A patriarchal reversal is defined as a “fundamental mechanism employed in the world construction and world-maintenance of patriarchy; basic method employed in the making of patriarchal myths, ideologies, institutions, policies, and strategies” (93).
For purposes of this chapter, it is particularly important to zero in on the trope of deception that is used in the *Jerry Springer* episodes. In addition to the trans woman’s identity as in and of itself fraudulent (although she professes to be a woman she is “really” a man, a gay man at that) she is doubly deceptive in that she “lies” to a pitiable, duped, straight man. It is almost as if the straight male has been forced into homosexuality through the figure of the duplicitous, conniving trans woman. This “forced homosexualization” is met by revulsion and disgust both by the heterosexual man who has been “fooled” and by the studio audience. The Chicago studio audience functions to reinforce the importance of heteronormativity through a performance of what Julia Kristeva calls abjection.12 Through the act of performing their own disgust, they uphold hegemonic notions of sex, gender and sexuality. The abjected person, the transsexual, is rendered as a disgusting, lying, gender freak whose transgressions pose a serious threat to “normal” society members.

People’s gender identities are not just a game. And yet, media culture often trivializes gender identity in ways that are insidious. Another talk show example is *The Maury Povich Show*. On a variety of episodes of this long-running program,13 Povich has turned gender into a guessing game. Typically, he will parade twelve hyper-feminine, glamorous women in front of his studio audience. During the course of the program, the contestants will take part in various staged exercises, like bathing suit or talent segments, and the audience is invited to survey their bodies for tell-tale signs of gender. Although they all “look” female, several of the women are MTF transsexuals who were born biological males, while the rest are cisgender females. In some episodes, Povich wore a tuxedo and handed out hundred dollar bills to audience members who
“correctly” guess the gender of the model. During the course of the show, the contestants reveal their “true” gender. The basis for their “true” gender is always their assigned sex at birth, never the way they identify or live their lives. Like the “I’m really a guy” discourse on *The Jerry Springer Show*, Povich resorts to a strict biological essentialism for gendering the models on stage. Far from educational, the contestants almost never get a chance to tell anything about their lives as transgender or cisgender women. In addition, the shows promote femininity as patriarchal spectacle, a spectacle to be consumed and evaluated based on hegemonic criteria of physical attractiveness. Transsexuals who “pass” are rewarded for their superior efforts at “pulling off” socially correct versions of femininity. Simultaneously, cisgender women who look “mannish” (i.e. look like transsexuals) are castigated for failing to live up to socially produced notions of proper female embodiment and feminine gender expression. Ironically, these shows do pivot on the notion of gender as a social construct, which is a good thing. Audiences frequently make the “wrong” (as determined by the show) gender designation. Through this process, they see that the appearance of gender is not always congruent with a person’s sexed embodiment or initial sex designation. However, to the extent that this allows for an understanding of gender as socially produced and culturally contingent, it is quickly closed down hard and fast by an insistence on one’s biological sex assignment as the be-all and end-all of gender identity. Further, by pitting cisgender and transgender women against each other, Povich and his producers further the notion of a “real” womanhood and a “fake” womanhood and further suspicion and competition between cisgender and transgender women, rather than mutual support, sisterhood and positive coalitions. This has relevance for our work here on deception. While the real women
come by their femininity naturally (via birth), the trans women’s femininity is artificial and constructed, a form of gender impersonation or gender fraudulence. In fact, as Judith Butler and other gender theorists have pointed out, all gender is artificial, performative and imitative.\textsuperscript{14} It is not that the transgender woman’s femininity is imitative and counterfeit while the cisgender woman’s femininity is “real,” genuine and bona fide. All femininities are copies of copies: replicas, simulations and facsimiles. There is no pristine source of femininity that is the original because there is no original. This is not to assert that people are not sincere in their gender \textit{identities} or that all gender is voluntarist. People do not necessarily opt into their gender expression by simply pulling a different outfit from the closet each day, although that is one possibility. I believe that it is important that we stop the notion that some gender expressions are merely imitative while others are pre-discursively “authentic.”\textsuperscript{15} In fact, they are all simulations, and all highly contingent in terms of their embeddedness in society and culture. As a culture, we must embrace the full range of gender identities and expressions and stop assuming that there is a stable and universal coherence between assigned sex, gender identity, gender expression, gender attribution and sexual orientation.

Another example of this “deception” phenomenon is the TV reality show \textit{There’s Something About Miriam} that aired in the U.K. in 2004. It featured a Mexican model named Miriam who was the object of affection of six men who competed to win her heart. Not different from most reality dating shows on the surface, the big novelty here was that Miriam is a pre-operative, transsexual woman. The men who vied for her affections were not told, nor were they apparently aware, that Miriam is a trans woman. After Miriam picked the winner in the season finale, she told all her suitors that she was
born as a man. Although the winner originally accepted the prize money and trip with Miriam, he later refused it and joined a lawsuit with the other male show contestants to sue the production company. The men settled for an undisclosed amount. Since then the show has aired not only in England, but also in Australia, Poland, Argentina and in the U.S. on the Fox Reality network. To state that this show does not present transgenderism in a favorable light would be a huge understatement. Basically, Miriam’s identity is rendered into a “freak show” for the consumption of an often already unsympathetic viewing audience. The focus is taken off the real issue—the continuing oppression and persecution of transgender people—and placed onto supposedly “innocent” men who are duped and humiliated. The very setup of the show promotes the idea that transsexual women are liars, and the biggest victims of these liars are their romantic partners. The show adds fuel to the fire to encourage and legitimate hate crimes against trans women by men who are enraged upon finding out the “truth.” While I think this was a problematic thing to do to these men,\(^{16}\) I think ultimately it is transgender people who suffer the most from exploitative representations such as this one. This show can be placed in a larger tradition of trash “ambush” TV that was put into greater cultural focus when a guest on The Jenny Jones Show killed a fellow guest after he revealed a same sex crush to him on the air.\(^{17}\) VH1 did a clips show in which they listed the Miriam debacle in their program entitled “Hoaxes, Cheats and Liars.” This program title nicely encapsulates the way that many in our society continue to view transgender people: as cheats and liars. Our very identities are seen as hoaxes, as fraudulent and as inauthentic.

In addition to talk shows, situation comedies have been an interesting site of engagement with transgender issues for a number of years. A show whose basic premise
depended on cross-dressing was the sitcom *Bosom Buddies* (1980-1982). Tom Hanks and Peter Scolari star as two New York men who, desperate for cheap rent, disguise themselves as women in order to move into the women-only Susan B. Anthony Hotel. Like talk shows, I think it is important to discuss them alongside films to situate the trope of deception in the larger transgender media canon. One of the other things which structures issues of “deception,” or people not knowing about another person’s trans identity is *when* a person comes out. There is a trend in television situation comedies of bringing back an old friend who has undergone a gender transition and then having that friend “come out” to one of the principle characters on the sitcom. This plot line has been used on shows as diverse as: *The Jeffersons; Night Court; Just Shoot Me; Becker; Two and a Half Men;* and *In the House.* The “normal” character is always shocked by a transgender person’s coming out, and the emphasis shifts from the difficulty of being transgender to the difficulty this places on the shoulders of a friend or loved one. In addition, sometimes the character feels upset, asking why the trans person did not tell them sooner about their identity; they may even feel betrayed. This is akin to the cisgender person asking why the trans person did not “come out” sooner to their romantic partners. Both questions ignore the role of cultural transphobia and internalized transphobia and how these forms of bigotry radically structure interpersonal relationships. Perhaps those who pose these questions would do better to make the world a more hospitable place for gender-variant people of all kinds, to help engender a world where people can be themselves and come out early without fear of violence, hatred and discrimination.
Just as the sensationalistic and trashy elements in tabloid talk do not exempt them from criticism, the “light-hearted” sitcoms and cross-dressing caper movies are not immune because they are comedic. Comedy cannot be written off as mindless entertainment, any more than romances, horror movies, action flicks or other popular culture genres can be. These comedies help to construct meaning in the minds of viewers. They also help to form and reflect significations of gender, particularly through the trope of cross-dressing. While these cross-dressing capers may seem benign on the surface, and some are indeed quite funny, they all too often succumb to immobilizing cultural ideals. My particular assertion in this chapter is that they use the trope of transgender people as deceptive in order to further their comedic plot devices. This idea that transgender people are being who they are not in order to get something they want is reflected in these films, and reinforced in scores of other cultural texts. Further, these forays into cross-dressing are temporary and pedantic; the cisgender characters go back to their “normal” lives but with a better understanding of the “opposite sex.” Although the films sometimes blur the lines of male/female and gay/straight, they ultimately function to reproduce those very lines in the end and backtrack on any gains made towards loosening gender scripts. Most importantly for purposes of this chapter, they further the notion that transgender people are “deceptive” and use their gender changes to selfishly acquire things that they want while hurting others in the process. The reel world cultural code of the Transgender Deceiver is troubling for trans people for the ways in which it potentially structures our lives in the real world.

In keeping with an understanding of postmodernism, against-the-grain analyses, and the pleasures of the text, I also must ask whether there are things that are potentially
disruptive or subversive in these films. Given that they are “comedies” I do believe that laughter can potentially loosen up people a bit to begin looking at gender and sexuality conventions with less rigidity. In particular, I am often struck by the following films for the ways in which they play with sexuality and queer desire. The gender masquerade frees up the characters even as it simultaneously restrains them. While the master text of the Transgender Deceiver looms large, there is also a potential for dislodging, albeit temporarily, the cultural logics of hyper-heterosexuality. While analyzing the Transgender Deceiver is my primary task in the text that follows, I also pay attention to transgressive sexuality and how this potentiality opens up intriguing possibilities.

*Tootsie:* “But I Was a Better Man with You, as a Woman, than I Ever was with a Woman, as a Man”

Apart from *Some Like It Hot*, perhaps one of the best-known cross-dressing capers is the 1982 film *Tootsie*. Directed by Sydney Pollack, the film was a commercial hit, a recipient of critical acclaim and numerous award nominations and wins. Interestingly and importantly, the film had the working title *Would I Lie to You?* in the U.S. before being re-named *Tootsie*. The film centers on the life of thirty-something actor Michael Dorsey (Dustin Hoffman). Michael lives in New York City with his roommate Jeff Slater (Bill Murray). Both are struggling to make it in the entertainment industry as actors and feeling the sting of brutal competition. The film follows Michael in his career, his relationships, and through his many successes and failures. It is highly entertaining, funny and engaging as a film, guaranteed to charm many audiences and possibly even cajole them to ponder social gender roles, but a more critical reading brings about several problems, as outlined below.
The movie opens with Michael putting on male makeup: a moustache. It then shows Michael teaching an acting class and trying out for various acting roles. Although Michael acts his heart out for each audition, he is told he is not the right age, size, doesn’t have the right look for the part, etc. He tells his students that unemployment is part of being an actor in New York and that they had better get used to it. Michael works as a waiter at a restaurant with his roommate Jeff. Early in the film, the two come home and Jeff has arranged a surprise birthday party for Michael. The scene symbolizes that Michael’s life is ticking away, and that the one “great” acting part continues to elude him.

One of Michael’s students and friends is Sandy Lester (Teri Garr). Michael runs lines with Sandy for a part in a soap opera. He accompanies her to the audition to provide moral support, but she does not get the part. Michael then goes to see his agent George (played by *Tootsie* director Sydney Pollack) and a heated argument ensues. Michael complains that George is not getting him any roles. George counters that nobody hires Michael because he is so difficult and hard to get along with on set. Michael leaves in a huff and apparently comes up with an idea.

The next scene is signature *Tootsie* and opens with Michael walking down a vibrant and bustling Manhattan street—dressed as a woman. He has decided to audition for that role in the soap opera his friend Sandy tried out for, but as a woman, since he cannot seem to find any roles as a man. He auditions for the director Ron (Dabney Coleman). Michael gets the role and thus begins the film’s extended plotline of cross-dressing antics.

As in other films of this ilk, “passing” is a non-issue. This willing suspension of disbelief is necessary for the plotline to work, particularly the comedy. Once Michael
Dorsey transforms himself into Dorothy Michaels, she is only “readable” as male when she intentionally “outs” herself. In fact, she goes to the Russian Tea Room and sits down with her agent George, who does not recognize her. Only when she thoroughly outs herself does George realize that this is Michael dressed as a woman. One of the things that this does is make it impossible for characters in the film to see similarities between male and female personas; the characters must not see any similarities between Michael and Dorothy, while we—the audience—are not fooled. Passing is an integral part of *Tootsie*. Michael must be “believable” as Dorothy in order to make others believe that he is, in fact, her. This includes not just many in his circle of friends and co-workers, but a huge at-home viewing audience that grows to love and empathize with Dorothy on the television soap opera. In fact, it is important for the soap opera audience to accept Dorothy as a woman to fully engage with her pseudo-feminist character.

In a transgender context, passing refers to the ability of someone to successfully be perceived as the gender role they are presenting in, a role that does not “match” their assigned, biological sex. In the case of MTF transpeople, this means that in social contexts, other people “read” them as female and accept them as women. In our society, gender is often heavily scrutinized. We operate under unwritten scripts that indoctrinate people into the “rules” of masculinity and femininity. Those who blur, cross, violate or transcend the socially-constructed lines of male/female and masculine/feminine in our society are subjected to abuse and punishment. Gender is a complex set of social interactions governed by mechanisms of disciplining and punishment. Those who do not do gender “right” are reminded of their nonconformance by social and cultural actors who uphold hegemonic ideology.
In the real world, passing is often a very complicated and difficult issue for transgender people. Just as a slight, short, biological male with an androgynous voice and little facial or body hair can be born transgender, so too can a tall, heavy, natal male with heavy facial and body hair and a booming baritone voice, as well as many variations in between. For those who have more traditionally “masculine” traits and body types, passing can be a very difficult endeavor, and sometimes one that is never accomplished, despite the use of technological interventions such as hormones and surgery. However, in the realm of media culture, passing often seems like a non-issue, or like it is easily achieved. Although it is true that this is partially due to successfully pulling off particular plot devices (which are often quite elaborate), I believe there is a deeper reason that operates at the level of fundamental, cultural ideology.

This ease of passing is disturbing and problematic on many levels. For starters, it reinforces the notion that America is a limitless array of personal opportunities that one can easily achieve if one tries hard enough. Just as one can climb the American ladder of professional and economic success through sheer will and effort, so too can one be any gender they aspire to if they just change their outer trappings. This emphasis on personal identity work ignores the larger context of the social world and its complex rules for gendered interactions. *Tootsie* features the usual montage of Michael/Dorothy shaving his legs in the bath tub, putting on his make-up, setting his wigs, and trying on female clothes, then going out into the world to be universally accepted as female. Although this seems to be a standard occurrence in the “reel” world, this is not how it usually works in the “real” world. In order for the plot device to work, Michael must be absolutely accepted as Dorothy in all of his social interactions and in his professional life. In
essence, this constitutes the model of deception. If people suspected his biological maleness, the plot line of deception would cease to function. Michael and Dorothy are bifurcated to such an extreme that they basically become two different people. It is my assertion that the model of gender bipolarity is so rigidly engrained in U.S. society that it is easier to conceive of Michael and Dorothy as two entirely separate people than to see them as one person with differing personalities or personas. Kate Bornstein gathers the “rules” of gender originally formulated by ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel in her well-known text *Gender Outlaw* (45-52). Rule number six states: “Everyone must be classified as a member of one gender or another. (There are no cases where gender is not attributed)” (49). While Michael is attributed is male, Dorothy is attributed as female. The liminality of Michael/Dorothy, hir status as a uniquely combined gender subject composed of multiple and contradictory sexual signifiers is minimized by the need for cultural intelligibility within social situations. Ironically, a film that on the one hand plays with gender conventions reifies gendered rules and hegemonic logic on the other.

However, the people and situations that these two personas interact with are not entirely separate; in fact, the comedy revolves around the fact that they are frequently identical. In order to live in both worlds as two separate people, Michael/Dorothy must write an ever-growing script of lies to successfully pull off his bi-gendered life. Audience members begin to associate Dorothy/Michael’s actions with deception. This “reel world” characterization then potentially bleeds into already circulating cultural accounts of transpeople in the “real world.”

In addition to feeding the trope of deception, it also perpetuates the false paradigm of gender dimorphism. One can’t be both a man and a woman simultaneously; in fact, to
be both a man and a woman means to be two entirely different people. This is also seen in the reaction of the loved ones of transgender people, particularly parents. Often, they will talk about the “death” of their son or daughter and their need to mourn that person’s death. This is marked by a concomitant time period to adjust to their “new” loved one. Obviously, for transpeople the coming out period is often marked by celebration and emancipation: it is not that their previous persona has “died” so much as their true essence has finally been liberated. As society continues to grapple with the gender diversity in its midst, it will be interesting to see if paradigms such as “death” and “rebirth” are replaced with less radical models that are able to fully embody gender complexity, ambiguity and contradiction.

As discussed earlier, many people in U.S. society believe that transgender people are inherently deceptive. They believe that transgender people are being what they are not.19 Transgender activists, for a long time, have been countering this by stating that transgender people are being who they are, not being who they are not. It just so happens that who they are is a gender role/expression that does not align with their body’s cultural significations. People readily fall back on the supposed coherence and materiality of the body as a source of “realness” and cultural intelligibility and legibility. In this line of thinking, the “truth” of a person’s gender is written onto the space of their material body. Dorothy’s donning of padding, female clothing, wigs and make-up is acceptable because it is seen as artifice utilized to change Michael’s gender attribution for a specific social purpose. The same acceptance may not be extended to those in the “real world” because the rationale is much more challenging than “dressing up” to land a role as an actor.
Ironically, in the special features section of *Tootsie* on DVD, coinciding with its 25th anniversary, Dustin Hoffman references the 1970s “outing” of Renée Richards, the MTF transsexual, high-profile professional in women’s tennis. While Hoffman referenced this real-life case of transsexualism in the formulation of the story for *Tootsie*, references to real-life transsexualism in *Tootsie* are wholly absent, except for a few jokes. When Michael meets her agent George for the first time dressed as Dorothy, George declares: “I told you you needed therapy.” Then, when Michael tells his roommate Jeff, he asks Dorothy if he is just doing this for the money, or if he actually likes wearing those “little outfits.” Within the discourse of the filmic text, cross-dressing/cross-living is tightly authorized because (and only because) Michael needs work. He cannot seem to get an acting role as a man, but he can get one as a woman, becoming Dorothy Michaels to play a woman character on a TV soap opera. In this way, what society considers “deviant” behavior is temporarily sanctioned. This reminds me of the drag stage, where cross-dressing is allowed because it is done in a night club for patrons who want to see it and view it for entertainment purposes. Some of the drag performers will take part in the discursive strategy that they are only doing it as a “job,” for money, and that elsewhere in their life they are “normal,” everyday men. What does this say about those for whom the whole world is their “stage” and who make no bones about their erotic, personal and emotional satisfaction in cross-dressing and cross-living?

Perhaps the most important point about deception in this film and others involves the issue of inter-personal relationships. During his very first audition, Dorothy works with the talented and beautiful actress Julie Nichols (Jessica Lange). It is obvious that Michael/Dorothy is very attracted to Julie from the onset and that they have a very
special chemistry when they appear in scenes together. This chemistry is also transferred off set, where they quickly start up a close friendship. In addition, Julie introduces the matronly Dorothy to her father Les, who is a recent widower. The three go on a trip to the family country home and spend some quality time together. During the trip, Les lays out his thoughts on gender relations, which are patriarchal, outdated and misogynistic. Because the character Dorothy plays in the soap opera is, on the surface at least, presumed to be “feminist,” Les feared that she was one of those “liberators” and insists that some women seem like they want to be entitled to be men. “We’re not the same… Bulls are bulls, and roosters don’t try to lay eggs.” Les has an obvious attraction to Dorothy and tries to put the moves on her, which Dorothy successfully halts. Later, when Dorothy turns in, she sleeps in the same bed with Julie and strokes her hair, obviously physically attracted to her. After the trip, Les actually proposes to Dorothy, while Dorothy tries to put the moves on Julie, which Julie rebuffs and interprets as lesbian. In terms of both of their lives, Dorothy becomes quite intimate. By pulling on their most intimate human emotions, Dorothy’s deceptions are intensely problematic.

Dorothy’s reveal and “de-wigging” come towards the end of the film. During a taping of the soap opera, Dorothy tells a convoluted story in which she reveals herself to be a man. During this scene, both the at-home audience of the soap opera and the people in Dorothy’s personal and professional life discover the truth about Dorothy’s gender masquerade. Chief among them are Julie, who is on set. She approaches Michael and punches him in the stomach. Michael is then able to sort things out with the two of them. He meets Les at a bar and they talk through what happened “man to man.” Les insists that the only reason Michael is still living is because Dorothy never kissed him. Les has
found a new girlfriend, anyway. The last scene features Michael going up to Julie on the street after she has left the studio for the day. Julie is very angry with him. Michael insists that he just did it for the work and that he never meant to hurt anyone. Julie states that she misses Dorothy, and Michael replies that she does not have to because Dorothy is right there. In one of the more famous lines from the film, Michael says: “I was a better man with you as a woman than I ever was with a woman as a man. I got to learn to do it without the dress. At this point in our relationship there might be an advantage to me wearing pants.” By the end, Michael has won Julie back and a relationship is imminent.

As discussed previously in this chapter, in the “real” world, trans people who allegedly “trick” others are not treated so gingerly and often confront hatred, violence, and murder. Les’s quip that the only reason Michael is still alive is because he did not kiss him is all too real; the implication is clear—that Les would have killed Michael. While in the end Michael learns how to become a better man and even gets the girl, all too often there is not such a happy ending for trans women in the U.S. They may pay with their lives, they may be beaten, they may be called liars and frauds, and they may end up emotionally devastated. Tootsie throws around the trope of deception as if it is an innocuous toy. While one could watch Tootsie and make the assumption that gender is done on a playground, real spectators of trans life more often see gender as a battleground.

This “play” is extended from gender to sexuality. The sexual shenanigans are genuinely funny and perhaps proffer more potential for subversive possibilities than gender itself. In addition to Dorothy’s interest in Julie, which is coded as lesbian, but heterosexual underneath, we have Les’s interest in Dorothy, which is seen as
heterosexual, but underneath the potential of male homosexuality is imminent. Gender masquerade is a way for *Tootsie* to engage with notions of queer sexuality. This tension creates nervous laughter from the audience, who are positioned in ways that make them “in on the joke” when the characters themselves are not. Given *Tootsie*’s popularity as a mainstream movie, this engagement with queerness should not be immediately discounted. Given the invisibility or demonization of queer sexuality, *Tootsie* does at least foreground homoeroticism in ways that are visually arresting and intriguing. It is interesting to note the ways in which Toosie’s gender masquerade essentially authorizes sexual playfulness that is routinely closed to gender-normative, heterosexual men like Michael. What kind of “lesbian” would Michael become with his love interest, Julie? How would Tootsie, portrayed as a strong woman, negotiate a seemingly heterosexual relationship with the chauvinistic Les? While these questions are not, of course, answered, the engaged and critical viewer could ponder sexual possibilities that are rarely depicted in mainstream cinema.

Yet a third sexual liaison is invoked— one that is more problematic. One of Dorothy’s co-actors on the soap is an elderly, alcoholic British character John Van Horne (George Gaynes) who has to read all his lines from a teleprompter. Van Horne obviously has a thing for Dorothy; he follows her home and serenades her in order to get into her apartment, which he manages to do. Once inside, he attempts to become sexual with her against her will and is only stopped when he sees Jeff, Dorothy’s roommate, whom John assumes is also Dorothy’s live-in lover. In addition to being uncomfortable with jokes about attempted rape, I am once again struck by how this could have played out in the real world. Trans women, like their cissexual female counterparts, are frequently victims
of sexual assault and harassment. However, unlike anatomical females, trans women face the added danger of the perpetrator finding out their biological status if they are pre- or non-operative. This could cause them to fly into a rage that could escalate the violence of the assault. While the film tries to playfully deconstruct layers of gender and sexuality, it also is quite irresponsible in the ways in which it makes light of serious issues and the very real potential of violence and oppression caused by subverting gender and sexual norms.

Scholars have discussed Tootsie’s anti-feminism (Showalter; Garber 6-9) Showalter writes: “to my mind, Tootsie is not a feminist film. In England, where the drag act is one of the last preserves of a virulent misogyny, the minstrel show of sexist culture, film critics were skeptical of Tootsie, seeing the buxom Dorothy as a familiar caricature, and the film’s pretensions to raised consciousness as insulting to women” (122). As these scholars indicate, it is quite possible to watch Tootsie and feel degraded as a woman because a man, Michael, is shown as being a better woman as Dorothy than any of the cissexual females in the film. “The implication is that women must be taught by men how to win their rights. In this respect, Tootsie’s cross-dressing is a way of promoting the notion of masculine power while masking it” (Showalter 123). Sadly, this potentially furthers not only misogyny towards women, but also brings in trans-misogyny because it implicates trans women as the competitive foes of cissexual women rather than as the allies. I understand that Michael is not transgender but was doing this as a “job” to make money. However, given the way that trans cultural codes work in media, and how sensationalized they often are, these images may bleed into popular consciousness surrounding real, flesh-and-blood transgender people. While Michael may hang up his
dress and revert to strict heterosexuality with Julie at the film’s contrived end, transgender and queer people continue to struggle with the limitations of a patriarchal, gender-normative, heterosexist society. In *Tootsie*, Michael pretends to be something he is not to get something he wants. In reality, transgender people switch, straddle or blur gender roles to be who they are, not who they are not. And not only do they not acquire something from this (except the ability to be who they are), they routinely are brutally punished, disenfranchised and often left isolated from friends and family. It is interesting that tropes of deception in “reel” life, à la *Tootsie*, are handled with such relative ease. In real life, the consequences can be downright deadly. Although *Tootsie* is supposed to be a lighthearted comedy, and there are things I like and enjoy about it, such as its playful, deconstructive engagement with sexual conventions, ultimately its vision of gender and gender transgression is marred by anti-feminism and the trope of deception.

**Just One of the Guys: Flirting with Homoeroticism**

*Just One of the Guys* was released in 1985, directed by Lisa Gottlieb, and is loosely based on the Shakespeare play *Twelfth Night*. Out of the four films discussed in this chapter, this is the only cross-dressing caper to involve an FTM transformation. It has been compared to other FTM transformation films such as *Yentl* (1983), *Motocrossed* (2001) and *She’s the Man* (2006). Some viewers have had a markedly negative reaction to the film, such as the following comment: “This ain’t no *Yentl*. Despite swishing up a storm in boy clothing, Terry never stirs up any sexual confusion in Rick. She never attracts any unwarranted attention and almost every opportunity to mine girl-in-a-guy’s world scenarios for discomfort is avoided. It’s puerile and irritating” (Bernstein 185).
However, as we shall see below, its legacy is much more complicated than it first appears.

The film is a teen comedy that centers on the experiences of Terry Griffith (Joyce Heyser), a pretty high school student who aspires to a career in journalism. Terry enters a high school journalism contest in which she submits an article. The prize is a coveted internship at a prestigious newspaper. However, Terry’s journalism teacher is not impressed with her article and gives the prize to a male student. Terry believes that her work is excellent and that sexism is to blame for her not receiving the internship. She decides to enroll in a high school in another town in order to experience school as a male student. She cuts her hair, dons male clothing and decides to make her new article a story about her experiences going under-cover as a male at this high-school where nobody knows her.

*Just One of the Guys* begins with a typical male-centered gaze of the female body. Terry is shown as an attractive, feminine, cisgender woman. The camera scans her conventionally attractive body as she awakens, has breakfast with her brother and is picked up by her college boyfriend, Kevin, a “stud”. This early scene functions to foreshadow Terry’s later gender transformation. At school, it becomes obvious that she is one of the “popular girls” and hangs with an exclusive crowd. Her home is large and her family is marked as upper middle-class. In fact, her parents are away for a long vacation, leaving Terry and her younger brother Buddy (Billy Jacoby) to their own devices.

Buddy, though not a central character in the movie, is quite unforgettable in his portrayal. He is the stereotypical sex-obsessed teenage male. Pretty much every scene he
is in revolves around him talking about sex or actively seeking out sex. His most singular quest seems to be to lose his virginity. The walls of his bedroom are covered with porn shots of naked females. He tells his sister: “The male body needs sex at all times. It is a living hell.” When Terry first begins her quest to live as a boy, she goes to Buddy for a crash course in gender-normative masculinity. The result is a lesson in over-the-top, parodic masculinity, including walking, packing a sock in her crotch, scratching her (non-existent) testicles and spouting a ridiculous version of boastful “jive talking.” Her brother’s final appraisal is that she will “pass” as long as she does not move. As a counterpoint, Alison Darren writes: “Now in drag she strongly resembles a soft gay boy or a baby-dyke (120). Although trying to portray a conventionally-gendered heterosexual guy, Terry can easily be read as queer, which augments readings of male homoeroticism in the scenes between Terry and Rick.

As in *Tootsie*, Terry essentially has no problems passing. (Interestingly, the actress who played Terry, Joyce Hyser, was 28 when she portrayed the high school student.) However, one of the interesting differences between this film and the others is how scared Terry is of successfully pulling off a male identity. While the male characters in the other films generally have a sense of mastery over the feminine, Terry is often shown as “deficient” in terms of masculinity and as over-anxious to prove herself as a guy. I believe that this, once again, reflects patriarchal culture, which is often hesitant to grant masculine/male status to people born female. She certainly has some challenging moments in the film, like how to navigate the boy’s locker room, but she does manage to be accepted as male to all who meet her. *Tootsie* certainly tries, in a liberal tolerance-teaching manner, to show some of the gender issues that are tied to women’s oppression
and to sexism, for instance: sexual harassment, domestic abuse, women being taken seriously, and mistreatment by men. In a similar vein, one of the key features of Just One of the Guys is the way the film explores the world of high school. It very much explores the jocks, the geeks, the popular girls, and the system of hierarchy and ranking within high school culture. One of the key themes in the film is the way that certain males (geeks, less popular/less athletic boys) are constantly made fun of and harassed by the alpha male jocks. In particular, Greg Tolan (William Zabka) is the blonde, athletic, alpha male who is dating the pretty and popular cheerleader, Deborah. As the new guy, Terry is mistreated by them, but also witnesses the mistreatment of non-hegemonic males such as Reptile, known for bringing various animals of that class to school.

One of the guys Terry meets is named Rick Morehouse (Clayton Rohner). He is neither a popular guy nor a “geek,” but somewhere in the middle of the high school popularity hierarchy. Rick likes music and he and Terry seem to get along well. Like Julie in Tootsie, Rick becomes Terry’s homosexual (but really heterosexual) love interest. In fact, when Terry is excused from gym by a doctor’s sick note, he is made “towel boy,” and looks with lust at Rick’s naked body as Rick exits the shower. In one of the more subversive moments of the film, Terry is not seen as timid and asexual, but rather as curious in terms of his homoerotic desires. Meanwhile, a sexually precocious teen named Sandy (Sherilyn Fenn) shows an interest in Terry and eventually invites him and Rick on a double date with her and her cousin Jill.

Buddy chastises his sister for the upcoming double date. He states that for research Terry is willing to toy with this poor girl’s emotions and that “all you transvestites are alike.” Unlike Tootsie, Just One of the Guys repeatedly references the
language of transgender; in addition to the above comment for example Buddy jokingly tells his mother on the phone that Terry is becoming a transsexual. In the comment, Buddy openly touches on the trope of deception. During the date, Rick and Jill go off on their own, leaving Terry and Sandy by themselves. Sandy discovers Terry’s sock in his crotch, but finds it flattering that he tried to impress her. “How small can it be?”, Sandy asks flirtatiously, and tries to put the moves on him, but Terry is made very uncomfortable by her advances. As in *Tootsie*, the film uses the ever-present specter of homosexuality to provoke gender and sexual anxiety, even as it plays with gender and sexual roles.

Back home after that date, Terry must transform back into a girl for a date with her boyfriend Kevin. Kevin does not like Terry’s haircut and their relationship seems to be in trouble. Terry is dealing with her growing attraction to Rick. In fact, she soon takes him on a shopping trip to buy him new clothes and get him a haircut. Back at school, however, alpha male Greg notices Rick’s new look and decides to purposely spill food all over Rick’s new shirt. When Terry and Rick go into the restroom to presumably clean up the shirt, Terry is taken aback when Rick goes to use the urinal. Terry is momentarily confused over how to behave at the prospect of seeing Rick's penis, because she is worried Rick will see her as a gay boy.

One of the key themes in the film is the issue of homosociality. In sociology, homosociality as a concept generally refers to close same-gender relationships of a non-sexual, or platonic, nature. In U.S. culture, people who are assumed to be the same gender often have greater access to each other, including the ability to see same-sex nude bodies. In *Tootsie*, Michael was shocked as Dorothy when she shared a dressing room
with the sexy woman April (Geena Davis) because she would constantly see her shirtless and braless and try not to ogle her breasts. In addition, Dorothy and Julie shared many very intimate moments as female friends, including the scene where they were in bed together and another scene at Julie’s house where she talked about her life and her dreams. In *Just One of the Guys*, Terry deals with the locker room and the nude guys in the shower, and it is a place both of anxiety for her, and one of seeming excitement and sensuality. This both naturalizes Terry’s core heterosexuality (her interest in men as a female) while simultaneously raising the possibility of homoeroticism given Terry’s current male persona. The homoeroticism is underscored when she sees Rick come out of the shower and also sees him stand at the urinal in the men’s room. Homosociality, the gendered space for “men” or for “women” to congregate, are revealed to Dorothy and Terry in new ways due to their gender crossing. In fact, this intimacy leads Dorothy to cross the line between homosociality and homosexuality when she tries to give Julie a “lesbian” kiss. Terry, too, must squelch her intense attraction to Rick to continue the ruse that their relationship is a strictly platonic friendship.

After Rick confronts Greg in front of the whole cafeteria about his abusive bullying, making fun of Greg’s low IQ and small genitals, Terry gains even more respect (and attraction) for Rick. Buoyed by his action in the cafeteria, Rick asks Greg’s girlfriend Deborah to the prom; she accepts.

The film’s climax happens at the prom, which is held at the beach, and it is quite a complicated mishmash of gender and sexual confusion. Terry decides to invite his best friend Denise (who knows about Terry’s gender crossing) to the prom. Although Greg and Deborah are named Prom King and Queen, Greg is furious that Deborah is attending
the prom with Rick. To demonstrate his rage, Greg hits Rick, and then Terry proceeds to
tackle Greg. Terry’s brother Buddy then shows up at the prom with Terry’s boyfriend
Kevin. Meanwhile, Greg throws Terry in the ocean, and then Buddy tackles Greg.
Terry’s boyfriend Kevin wants to know what is going on. Rick assumes that Kevin views
him as Terry’s new boyfriend and tells Kevin they are just friends. Finally, Terry takes
Rick off to be by themselves and tells him that she should have told him sooner. Rick
assumes this means that Terry is going to come out to him as gay. Undeterred, Terry
finally “outs” herself and says that she is a girl. “I’m a girl, I’m a woman.” Rick
responds: “Right, and I’m Cindy Lauper.” In an even more shocking reveal scene (“de-
wigging”) Terry busts open her tuxedo and shows Rick her large female breasts. He is
shocked and confused. Terry admits her love to Rick and kisses him on the lips in front
of everyone, which is read as a gay kiss. Rick exclaims: “It’s okay everyone—he has
tits!” Terry takes a cab home and discovers her brother Buddy in bed with her former
girlfriend Sandy. Terry states: “My voyage of self-discovery has ended in despair.” This
incredibly confusing climax is filled with multiple instances of deception. But the
biggest example is Terry lying about his identity to Rick. Obviously, there are very real
human emotions involved in this relationship, and Rick feels a sense of betrayal because
he did not know that Terry was not who she purported to be. Although the scene is
genuinely funny and in some ways progressive for the ways in which it subverts notions
of gender and sexuality, the duplicitous nature of Terry’s charade is cause for concern.
However, as we shall see, in the “reel world” there are no consequences for these actions,
a far cry from what happens in the “real world.”
At the end, Terry wins the journalism contest and the sexist teacher admits he was wrong. One day when Buddy picks Terry up from her internship at the paper, which she won through the contest, she meets Rick on the street. He tells her she looks good in a dress. He also admits that he misses her and that he read her article about being a boy. Terry admits that she still has feelings for Rick and asks him if he would like to go dancing. “I’m the guy here, let me try this.” Rick insists that he has to ask her out since he is the man, so he asks her to go dancing. And then he agrees to accept a ride home as long as he gets to drive. In a crude manner, Rick exerts his patriarchal, masculinist privilege at the film’s ending, a rather surprising juxtaposition given his previous filmic portrayal as a sensitive guy. Just like in Tootsie, the gender and sexual anarchy raised during the text of the film is all quieted down and straightened out by the end. In both films, a “normal” heterosexual relationship arises from the antics raised during the previous cross-dressing adventures. As Darren sarcastically writes: “Eventually at the prom, everything comes out and everyone learns something about gender and sexuality. In a happy ending, Rick will now consent to go out with Terry, once the sex roles have been firmly re-established. Thank goodness for that” (120). If we return to our central trope of deception, it is once again interesting to compare the “reel” to the “real.” When watching this film, I could not help but think about the story of Brandon Teena, the female-to-male transgender person from Nebraska who was discovered by his “friends” to be biologically female. Upon that discovery, Brandon was raped, sodomized, and killed along with two others in a rural Nebraska farmhouse. In the “real” world, there are always consequences for gender transgression. And further, when trans people try to live their lives authentically, they are called deceptive. The non-trans people in these films,
cisgender people, are in fact being something they are not to get something they want. Transgender people cross the gender line in order to express to the world their true identities. These characters are crossing the gender line in order to procure something that they desire, and being haphazardly duplicitous about who they are in the process in order to realize their goals. Do the ends justify the means? Although they are being deceptive, they are quickly forgiven, and this is due in large part to the fact that once the ruse is over, their bodies and desires are wholly recuperable within the framework of heterosexist gender-normativity. Julie felt betrayed in *Tootsie*, and probably exposed as well, due to the way she opened up to Dorothy in such intimate ways. While at the prom Rick states that he feels angered at Terry’s lack of honesty (her “bullshit”), it is interesting how the gender configuration changes things. While Michael has to apologize profusely to win Julie over, what Rick seems most concerned about is reverting to patriarchal power arrangements; *he* must ask Terry out, *he* must drive the car. Now that Terry wears the dress, she must conform to patriarchal inscriptions of proper femininity and modes of behavior within a heterosexual framework. If the film is a critique of sexism vis-à-vis the chauvinist journalism teacher, why does it end with a virtual tribute to male sexism in this final scene? While I understand that the producers of these films are more concerned with making an entertaining and lucrative movie than a socially conscious and norm-challenging piece of art, that does not alter the fact that the images produced and disseminated have real consequences for already-marginalized populations.

I believe we can better understand the ending by contrasting it with *Tootsie*. I believe the lesbianism engendered by Dorothy/Michael and Julie in *Tootsie* was simply not as threatening to patriarchy as the super-charged male homoeroticism sparked by
Terry and Rick. The scenes in the locker room and at the urinal both pointed to an intense homoeroticism that undoubtedly made the audience both anxious and titillated. In patriarchy, gay male sexuality is arguably a bigger threat than lesbian sexuality. (Although lesbian social and economic independence is very threatening to patriarchy.)

Because women are so devalued within male-dominated societies, their sexualities are not taken as seriously, particularly when there are two women involved. The “Playboy” notion of lesbianism is seen as another aspect of femaleness for patriarchal men to colonize. Two men threaten patriarchy in particular ways given the disgust many heterosexual men hold for male homosexuality and the way they associate it with femininity and “weakness.” Because of this threat to the hegemonic order, Rick reasserts his heterosexual masculinity in an obvious and crude way. Terry’s masculine play-acting must be ended, and the dominant order firmly reestablished.

Although it short-circuits a more subversive potentiality of gender and sexual progress, I do believe Just One of the Guys should be credited for being a forerunner of more explicitly pro-queer films. For instance, the authors of the recent book Underrated chose Just One of the Guys for inclusion in their book on underrated movies. “The recent spate of cross-dressing movies all owe a debt of gratitude to the one movie that made it okay to resort to lighthearted transvestitism in the pursuit of one’s proletarian goals. In the cross-dressing fad of the 1980s, Just One of the Guys stands out as the one truly awesome movie” (88). In fact, Just One of the Guys opened up a discursive space for later films to deal more directly with queerness through its early suggestive images. “The gender-bender comedy Just One of the Guys had glancingly considered the complications of same-sex attraction for teens, but eight years later its
essential opposite, *Just One of the Girls* (1993) demonstrated a certain shift in directly dealing with the homosexual tensions of its plot” (Shary 241). Shary goes on to note that *Just One of the Girls* did not have a restoration of heterosexual normalcy, which is firmly enforced upon Terry and Rick. Whatever its faults, *Just One of the Guys* is infinitely more progressive than the film we shall examine next.

**Sorority Boys: Frat Pigs and Sexual Shenanigans**

Out of the four films profiled here, the most blatantly offensive is *Sorority Boys*, released in 2002 and directed by Wallace Wolodarsky. As with *Just One of the Guys*, *Sorority Boys* is targeted at a high school/college audience, but it certainly has ratcheted up the level of crude “humor.” John Puccio describes the film as follows:

> Cross-dressing has been a staple of film comedy for most of the twentieth century and beyond. Frat-house comedy has been around a little less long, but has provided the screen with more than its share of good laughs. I suppose the producers of *Sorority Boys* figured if *Tootsie* and *Some Like It Hot* could entertain audiences, why not combine the tried-and-true boys-as-girls motif with the frat-house grossness of *Animal House* and see what would happen. What happened was a disaster (Puccio).

The film focuses on three members of a fraternity called KOK. The frat is known for its raucous parties (no surprise) and its deplorable treatment of women, particularly the women living in the sorority house called DOG. The film utilizes slapstick humor, but it also is homophobic and anti-feminist.
The KOK house has declared war on the DOG sorority, which it believes has the ugliest females on campus. During a KOK party, the DOG house President is out front encouraging party attendees to fight sexism and support feminism. Unfortunately, she is portrayed as a stereotypical feminist. The KOK house has a custom of lobbing brightly colored vibrators and dildos into the DOG house. In addition, KOK house parties have a “dog catcher” who literally captures women considered ugly or fat in a net and throws them out of the party. Also, it has a venerable tradition called the “walk of shame.” In this frat ritual, women who have had sex with a fraternity member and stayed overnight must walk past the entire fraternity the next morning while they sing a degrading song about her:

The girl was fair who went upstairs, with her favorite KOK.
She knocked around and came back down and now she takes the walk.
The walk of shame, she's not to blame,
Who could resist the KOK?
The walk of shame, she found her fame, and now she takes the walk!

The film next reveals that the three main characters of the film, Dave (Barry Watson), Adam (Michael Rosenbaum), and Doofer (Harland Williams), are also the committee for the frat’s annual cruise party. The president announces in front of the entire assembled KOK house that the money for the cruise has been stolen by those three. They are immediately kicked out of the fraternity, but discover that there is a videotape in the house that clearly shows the KOK House President, Spence, stealing the money and putting it in his safe. The camera had originally been set up so that Adam could secretly tape himself having sex with members of the Tri Pi’s, the “hot” sorority on campus. The
three men devise a plan to steal back the videotape to prove their innocence; but that night is the "all trim" party and only women are allowed in the KOK house. So, since they cannot attend as guys, they decide to go dressed as women. The guy who answers the door apparently believes they are women, but is disgusted by their ugly “dog-like” looks. They are unsuccessful getting the tape at the party, and end up over at the DOG house. DOG has free room and board for the first month, so the three guys decide to stay there and continue living as their femme selves: Daisy, Adina and Roberta. Although DOG is supposedly more feminist-oriented, one of the members calls the three a “real pack of barkers.” The president tells her that DOG does not give in to media images of women.

Other members of the DOG house include a French woman with a visible moustache, an imbalanced woman who screams a lot and a “giant” woman who is extremely tall. Although the president, Leah, is shown spouting feminist rhetoric, she very much conforms to conventional standards of beauty. In one of the many crude scenes in the film, Leah takes a shower with Daisy, whom she claims she cannot see because she is not wearing her contact lenses. Dave/Daisy covers his nonexistent “breasts” with soap foam and then we see that he has an erection—also covered with foam.

In patriarchal societies, rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment are colossal problems. Violence against women is ubiquitous, and media culture often makes a mockery of it or actively encourages it. Further, transgender women are often accused of donning women’s clothing to ogle women naked in the shower or bathroom in order to commit an assault. The film wallows in this stereotype and presents cross-dressed
males as pigs who wish to use their status to get closer to women in order to objectify them. Here, the men use deception in multiple forms. They deceive the women in the DOG house—the very sorority they have previously abused and mistreated—to get free room and board and ogle the president in order to sexually objectify and thus degrade her. The deceptive practices in this film, linked as they are to severe sexual exploitation and abuse, pale in comparison to the ones developed in both *Tootsie* and *Just One of the Guys*.

This anti-feminism is also evidenced by the way in which the film presents a women’s studies class. When Dave arrives for the class, the female professor tells him he is in the wrong class, because apparently men never take women’s studies classes. Dave sits next to Leah, whom he has exploited in the shower while pretending to be Daisy. The class is named “Femalehood in Crisis” and the Bohemian-looking professor tells the class the first lecture will be on the myth of the male orgasm; later, she tells them that they are going to discuss how and why the vagina is ergonomically superior to the penis. This flat caricature is an obvious disservice to the vitally important academic field of women’s studies, but it also fits in with a larger demonization and stereotyping of feminism upon which the film rests.

One of the most disturbing (though sadly not surprising) aspects of the film is how much the fraternity men buy into patriarchal standards of beauty. This beauty and body fascism is highlighted numerous times during the film. Apparently the simple act of dressing like a woman makes a biological male “feminine” in the traditional ways of the patriarchy. Throughout the film, the three men obsess over their appearance: their clothes, their weight and whether they are pretty or “hot.” One could argue that this may
mean that the film is implicitly critiquing the culture of beauty/body fascism by making
the men understand better how much women are judged based on their appearance. I
believe such a stance would be giving the film way too much credit. The men seem more
interested in buying into the stereotypes than challenging them. Like Tootsie and Just
One of the Guys, the film barters in pedantic notions of liberal tolerance: the men learn
that the way they treated the women of the DOG house was bad, and through getting a
taste of their own medicine their consciousness is altered. As film critic Scott Weinberg
notes: “The flick features a half-dozen wholly hateful jabs on women and then hopes to
make up for it during a pathetically contrived finale. (Gotta love when the slapstick poop
humor suddenly turns into a treacly scene of mock sincerity.)” This tepid liberalism is
shining evidence of how liberalism is often part and parcel of the problem just as much as
conservatism is. These individual men learning that they should not be so sexist and that
they should treat women better makes the problem about changing the behavior of
individuals; it does not in any way look at the larger system of oppression and demand a
more radical overhaul and genuine transformation on a global/macro scale. For instance,
the micro-politics of Sorority Boys does nothing to highlight the fact that many feminists
view fraternities as inherently oppressive, sexist institutions that should be eradicated.28
They are preservers of traditional gender, male privilege and centuries-old classist
traditions that do not serve a modern multi-gendered, pro-feminist and pro-queer campus
environment. Further, to the extent that Sorority Boys proffers these lukewarm lessons in
anti-sexism, they are enveloped by some of the most crude, misogynistic and
phallocentric scenes in screen history. However, Dennis Harvey, writing for Variety,
called the film “a cut above most youth-skewed sex comedies of late, with bouncy
execution and an unsophisticated but positive gender-sensitivity message.” Clearly, some will buy into the faux liberalism of the film, but I believe most will see right through such phoniness.

Perhaps the most insidious and disturbing scene is the following: in yet another attempt to steal back the infamous tape, Adam/Adina goes back to the KOK frat house and decides to give a “roofie” (Rohypnol, also known as the “date rape drug”) to Jimmy. Jimmy is the KOK house brother who has taken over the room where the tape is stored and has developed a strong crush on Adina. As in the other filmic texts, the shadow of homosexuality returns. Adina wants to give Jimmy the drug so that he will pass out and she can then steal the tape and settle the issue of the theft once and for all. However, Jimmy has plans of his own and gives a roofie to Adina, causing them both to pass out. When Adina returns to the DOG House, she and Roberta have the following conversation:

Adam/Adina: [She discovers a sticky substance on the back of her skirt] Ah.

That's weird.

Roberta: What the hell is on your skirt, man?

Adam/Adina: Uh... gum, or something.

Roberta: Oh yeah, what flavor was it? Big fat juicy cock?

During the course of the night, Jimmy anally raped Adina. Later in the film, the crime is referenced again as a joke by one of the Tri Pi sisters, referring to Adina as the “dog that Jimmy back-doored.”

Given the prevalence, not to mention serious physical, emotional, and mental effects of sexual assault, in general, and date-rape sexual assault in particular, I was
appalled to discover the film using this as “joke” material. The fact that sodomy and
date-rape drugs are used as comedic tools shows how offensive and woman-hating this
film truly is. It also continues to show the extreme stigmatization of homosexuality.

What if, gasp!, Adam/Adina and Jimmy had had *consensual* sex? Or what if Daisy and
Leah had gone beyond kissing and had had sex? The film furthers the specious notion
that pre-operative or non-operative transgender people do not and should not have sex. It
is simply too “confusing” to be sexual with a person whose gender expression does not
match their physical/anatomical sexed embodiment. And yet, pre- and non-op trans
people have sex all the time, and the vast majority of times they are open with their trans
and cis partners about their lives, identities and bodies, and their partners accept them and
desire them as sexual beings. While *Tootsie* and *Just One of the Guys* do, in fact, contain
some more playful explorations of crossing the boundaries of gender and sexuality,
*Sorority Boys* utilizes sexualized violence, shaming and crudeness to ridicule any
attempts to re-write hegemonic, patriarchal scripts.

We also see the way deception in this film functions as yet another closet, a way
to marginalize and stigmatize transgender bodies and queer desires. Heteronormativity
reigns supreme in this film. Despite the obvious presence of gender variance, it is used
not to expand gender categorizations and gender options, but to reaffirm, reify and
reconsolidate traditional, patriarchal gender norms. This is a shame because given the
subject matter it is possible to imagine them doing something more daring. The gender
crossings in the film almost seemed to be used to invoke a cautionary tale: when the
“sacred cow” of gender is messed with, witness the chaos it unleashes. (Ironically, these
films also capitalize on this “comedy or errors” chaos for maximum comedic affect.)
This is why, in the end, all must be returned to normal, and the gender ambiguities and complexities unfurled during the bulk of the film must be neatly folded back into the hegemonic binary structure. And how does it end? On the annual cruise, they finally play the long lost tape and prove that Spence stole the money. They also reveal their identities. Leah feels deceived and hurt by Dave’s antics, but eventually forgives him and the two make out. Once again, normative sex-gender relations are restored, and, perhaps more insidiously, the trope of deception is used once again with seemingly little consequence, except to bleed into the public consciousness a twisted version of transgender people’s lived realities, motivations and ethics. Paramount to the trope of deception is fairly straightforward misogyny and anti-feminism, where women’s lives are sexualized, trivialized and mocked in service of men gaining ever greater access to women’s private emotional and intimate lives. Steve Rhodes nicely sums up this film when he writes: “Most bad movies have at least some redeeming features. Sorority Boys isn't most movies.” Our final film featuring Transgender Deceivers takes us to the world of sports.

**Juwanna Mann: Female Impersonation on the Basketball Court**

Also released in 2002, *Juwanna Mann* (directed by first time feature director Jesse Vaughan) tells the story of a basketball player with a bad attitude. Marshall Fines refers to *Juwanna Mann* as “a black version of Tootsie in sneakers and basketball shorts.” Jamal Jeffries (Miguel A. Núñez, Jr.) is the *enfant terrible* of professional men’s basketball. When a kid asks him for his autograph, he stamps the kid’s paper rather than personally sign it. In an early scene, Jamal goes ballistic when the officials decide to take him out of a game. He lets forth a verbal assault and then, the *coup de grace*, strips
naked in front of the huge audience in the arena and in front of the cameras for the at-
home viewing audience. The basketball commissioner decides to suspend Jamal
indefinitely as he has grown tired of his unprofessional antics. As in *Tootsie*, Jamal’s
agent proves to be a relatively important character in the film. Lorne Daniels (Kevin
Pollak) has a difficult job as Jamal’s agent, and basically tells him he cannot find a spot
for Jamal anywhere in the league due to his belligerent behavior. Jamal’s world quickly
falls apart as he loses his house, cars and possessions due to lack of income to make the
payments. In addition, his wife tells him that without money and fame, he is worthless
and she leaves him. He is forced to move in with his aunt and figure out a way to make
money. Watching a girl play basketball one day, he decides to dress as a woman and try
out for a national women’s basketball league despite the fact that in an earlier scene he
saw an ad for the women’s league on TV and called it a “joke.” His tryout is successful
and he makes the team, becoming a member of the Charlotte Banshees. Jamal chooses
the name “Juwanna Mann” and begins his period of time living as a woman. Thus begins
another cross-dressing escapade and instance of “temporary transvestism,” complete with
still more deception and subsequent fallout which leads to genuine hurt and betrayal.
When juxtaposing these films, it is truly remarkable how formulaic the plotlines are. As
in the other films, Juwanna, too, must negotiate the locker rooms, and frequently finds
herself getting turned on by looking at nude women. To avoid discovery, she either goes
home to shower, or showers in her basketball uniform. She quickly develops a love
interest in the pretty team captain Michelle (Vivica Fox) and Michelle attempts to hook
Juwanna up with one of her male friends named Puff Smokey Smoke (Tommy
Davidson). Juwanna and Michelle go to the spa together and do some serious female
bonding, à la Dorothy and Julie in *Tootsie*. Once again, however, while Michelle is a seeking a gal pal, Juwanna is seeking a lover. Anna Smith writes of the film: “But questions abound: even if no one realizes he's a man, don't they notice the resemblance to the famous basketballer? Why don't the girls presume that a player constantly trying to touch them up is a lesbian? The result is an unpersuasive moral journey, with a smattering of laughs that fails to justify the insulting premise that only a man can help the ladies win at both basketball and love.” This takes us right back to *Tootsie*, which teaches women that they must be taught by men how to improve their lives. A scene that caused me to reflect upon comparisons between the “reel” and “real” world was the following: once, while Juwanna was driving, she was pulled over by a cop for speeding. Here is Juwanna, an African American male dressed as a woman, in a traffic violation situation with a white, male police officer. When he asks for Juwanna’s license, things get dicey. Finally, Juwanna relents and explains that she is a transsexual who has gone through sex reassignment, but apparently not updated her ID photo or legal name. Such a situation is actually a relatively common one for transpeople, where ID/name and gender expression do not necessarily line up congruently. This can “out” a trans person, or the cop may simply be able to “read” the person because they cannot or do not “pass.” Either way, it creates a potentially dangerous situation for transpeople if the presiding police officer is a transphobic bigot.30 So what happens in *Juwanna Mann*? The cop turns “nelly” and orders Juwanna to get out of the car and spin around. Then he tells Juwanna that he is planning on having the Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) procedure himself in the near future! Rather than look at the more serious repercussions of gender transgression, they squander any such opportunities with foolish and completely
unrealistic scenes. Later in the film, homosexuality again becomes the butt of a joke. Juwanna goes on the double date to be closer to Michelle, but she also must be closer to Puff, who reads her as a cissexual woman and comes on to her more and more aggressively. Juwanna ends up having to punch Puff in order to thwart his aggressive sexual advances. By now, the reader has noticed that these cross-gender escapades invariably approach both male and female homosexuality. The figure of the transgender person is able to invoke a more complex sexuality. As is seen elsewhere in this dissertation, this fluidity of gender and sexuality invokes fascination and disgust, desire and anxiety, fear and yearning. Interior and exterior heterosexuality provides safety and traction, while interior and exterior homosexuality generates fear and desire.

Juwanna’s relationship with Michelle provides a lesbian exteriority and a heterosexual interiority. The constant elision between the categories provokes a complex ambivalence in the spectator. If Juwanna’s attraction to Michelle is physicalized, what kind of relationship are they embarking upon? Surely, Juwanna is attracted to Michelle, but does Michelle return the attraction? In a kind of reversal, Juwanna’s relationship to Puff has a heterosexual exterior and a homosexual interior. Puff is attracted to Michelle’s exterior appearance, but what would he do if he found out that Michelle’s body does not match his preconceptions of her body? Similar scenarios happened between: Dorothy and Julie, Dorothy and Les, Dorothy and John, Terry and Rick, Terry and Sandy, Daisy and Leah, and Adina and Jimmy. Clearly, the trans body proffers a site of intrigue for cisgender viewers. But why is this apparent fascination heightened through the trope of deception?
In terms of sexuality, the trope of deception in these films references the signifying system of the closet, the “down low,” and the extensive network of tearooms, public restroom sex, and the male-male cruising culture. While male and female homosexuality is commonplace, they are often portrayed as rare phenomena. Further, the category MSM (men who have sex with men) was created by epidemiologists to study male-male sex and STD patterns, and whether those persons studied are defined as or self-identify as gay, bisexual, or neither. (Joseph; Schuetz; Loue) Some of these men live a traditional “straight” life with wife and children and yet have frequent sex with men or trans women on the side. The “down low” phenomenon refers to the African American community where black men have wives or girlfriends but also have secretive affairs or sexual liaisons with males. The secretiveness and furtiveness of homosexuality in these films mirrors the dominant attitudes towards non-normative sexual behaviors, identities and expressions. What would sexuality look like in our culture if same-sex sexuality (as well as gender transgression) were made fully visible, celebrated and incorporated into mainstream life? And yet, the literal and metaphorical constraints of the closet continue to push same-sex sexuality to the margins. The gender masquerade offers these films a chance to exploit non-normative sexualities while simultaneously reinforcing a heterosexual core.

*Juwanna Mann* ends similarly to the other films by underscoring the genre’s seemingly formulaic makeup. Juwanna must decide between suiting up for the playoff game with the Banshees, or throwing himself at the mercy of the basketball commissioner to try to get back in the men’s league. She chooses playing the Banshees game, and the team joyfully wins. However, at the very end of the game, Juwanna’s wig
falls off. This de-wigging was different in that it was not an intentional self-disclosure. Rather, it happened accidentally to Juwanna and thus she could not take active credit for her own de-wigging. His teammates are disgusted, especially Michelle. Once again, the viewing audience swallows the hurt caused by the deceitful cross-dressing figure. Puff, from the basketball stands, declares his continued love for Juwanna, but admits being confused. Taking a cue from the last scene in Some Like it Hot, where Jerry tries to explain to Osgood that he is a man: “Oh, you don't understand, Osgood! Ehhh... I'm a man.” Not missing a beat, Osgood replies: “Well, nobody's perfect.”

In a sense, Juwanna’s and Osgood’s responses are both funny and positively upbeat. They do not outright reject the person and they do not freak out or get belligerent. But, again, there is a difference between the way it is and the way it should be. As a transgender person and a transgender activist, I am struck by the fact that in the “reel” world there are basically no repercussions for what these people do. The films function to further the notion that gender is malleable, which is a good thing. But this important concept is not correctly contextualized. Yes, gender is malleable, but there are very real consequences (disciplining and punishment) for breaking the mold, though there should not be. Further, this is not some bizarre “game” that people do when they need a job, to clear their names, or to avoid the mob or write a newspaper story. “Real” transgender people struggle to live their lives with truth, honesty and integrity. They do not intentionally “deceive” people in order to get what they want when they want it. In addition, trans people’s complex gender expressions are generally not temporary phases, after which they go back to normative gender roles and strict notions of heterosexuality.
In our cultural framework, transgenderism is still often seen as a temporary phase that people go through. Many people believe that some choose to be transgender. While the characters in these films do not choose to be “transgender” per se, they do choose to utilize drag to present a different self-image in the social realm. While I understand there is a huge gap between these intentionally comic films and real life trans identity, I remain concerned with the slippage between the ideologies these films present and the way of looking that spectators bring to bear on “real world” transpeople. We still live in a virulently heterosexist culture in which there are psychologists and psychiatrists who attempt to “repair” trans and gay people to conform to hegemonic social scripts of gender and sexuality. After working through their “transgender” phase, the characters return to normative regimes of gender-normativity and heterosexuality. What is the possible residue and the cultural repercussions of images that continue to depict gender variance (and the hints of homoeroticism) as temporary stages en route to “proper” heteronormative couplings? Bill Nichols writes: “Ideology uses the fabrication of images and the processes of representation to persuade us that how things are is how they ought to be and that the place provided for us is the place we ought to have” (1). So how are audiences persuaded by ideology in these movies to think about gender, sexuality and the crossing of boundaries? Do they ultimately assert that the way things are is the way they ought to be?

Better Men?

If I had to summarize the basic plotline of the three films that center on male to female cross dressing (Tootsie, Sorority Boys, and Juwanna Mann) it is that in order to become better men, the protagonists had to temporarily become women to learn the error
of their ways. Michael Dorsey of *Tootsie* became more aware of sexual harassment and sexual assault, of how women are not listened to, and how they are judged based on their looks. Dave, Adam and Doofer of *Sorority Boys* presumably learn how hurtful their actions have been towards the DOG women, such as their practices of dog catching, dildo and vibrator bombing, and the “walk of shame.” Presumably, they learned that women deserve more respect and that looks do not count for everything. Jamal of *Juwanna Mann* becomes a better man in that he is forced to listen to women and to re-think his abusive and egotistical behavior on and off the court. He learns that women’s basketball is not a joke and that women’s teams work just as hard—if not harder—as men’s teams for success.

Certainly I agree that these are changes for the better, but one must also assert that these men ultimately get exactly what they want, and they use deception to do so. They toy with people’s emotions and enter into women’s innermost, intimate spaces. Often, they use this proximity as a way to further objectify women’s bodies sexually. These movies present people who arguably are deceptive, but does not represent them as such, and extends no punishments for their duplicitous behavior. *The Jerry Springer Show*, on the other hand, presents “real” transpeople who are trying to be honest about who they are and presents them as deceivers who must be condemned. In this way, cissexual people are allowed to gender cross with immunity, while transgender people’s gender crossings are viewed as conniving and inauthentic. These images seem to prop up status quo power differentials and the reinforcement of a specific gender paradigm. Once again, cisgender men are placed at the top of the gender/sexual pyramid to behave in unethical ways to gain things that they yearn for. Furthermore, as is the central thesis of
this chapter, although these are the actions of non-transgender characters, the recurrence of the Transgender Deceiver constructs a cultural code, or a master text, that potentially bleeds into the public’s perceptions of real-life, flesh-and-blood transgender people. There is already a very strong stereotype circulating that transgender people are deceptive, and that transgender people like to “fool” others in order to be accepted in their gender role. In particular, there is a rabid fear of trans women “deceiving” heterosexual men into thinking they are “real” women, and ensnaring them into a life of nonconsensual homosexuality. Sadly, these films help to further these stereotypes and to cast transpeople—trans women in particular—as inherently deceptive. Just as the Transgender Monsters in Chapter Four often do not meet the diagnostic criteria for transsexualism, my assertion is that, from the vantage point of popular culture, it does not matter. Given the lack of complex, multidimensional, and “positive” mediated representations of trans people, these caricatured portraits of gender crossing only serve to add fuel to the fire of cultural transphobia.

Perhaps one of the few more progressive possibilities of the films (excluding Sorority Boys) lies in their playful engagements with sexuality and their broaching of queer possibilities. Gender transgression provides a vehicle for exploring more diverse and complex sexual couplings than we are normally treated to in cinema. Audiences can obtain pleasure and laughter from these scenes to explore sexual possibilities beyond the usual scope. While it is true that normative heterosexuality shuts these opened windows hard and fast, at least they are opened and allow viewers to envision different possibilities.
To end this chapter, I would add one further comment by returning to Just One of the Guys. It is most interesting for me to see that, although this film follows many of the same formulaic elements as the others, it is also different because the protagonist switches not from male to female, but from female to male. The film is premised on the idea that Terry experiences sexism from her journalism teacher because she is female, i.e. she does not win the contest or receive the coveted internship because the male instructor favors male students and disparages Terry’s work because she is a woman. After Terry masquerades as a boy, writes a terrific journalism piece about it, and goes on to win the contest and the summer internship, there is not much validation or recognition of her fight against sexism. In fact, when she “confronts” the sexist male journalism teacher, it is not a confrontation at all. While he sheepishly admits his wrong-doing, Terry is almost apologetic and unable or unwilling to truly confront him in a more assertive or aggressive manner. As a feminist viewer, I was left wanting much more of a vindication for Terry in her fight against sexism. But even more disturbing was the ending. Although Terry is able to date Rick, the boy she developed a crush on while living as a boy, the ending is incredibly patriarchal and seems to undercut any potential feminist gains made in the film. Rick has to ask her out on the date, and he has to drive the car, to reassert his patriarchal privilege and restore the gender norms of male and female, masculine and feminine, under the logics of heteronormative, patriarchal rule. In a crude way, it is almost as if Rick is saying: I wear the pants, you wear the dress; no more crazy gender-bending. So while the male protagonists in the other films get to become better men (and in Tootsie’s case, Dorothy is smugly able to show cisgender women that she knows how to be a better feminist than they do), Terry, through her cross-gender adventures, is able
to prove herself as a journalist, but ultimately she must succumb to the regulatory norms of feminine subjectivity in patriarchal society. In addition, *all* of the characters must rigidly inhabit gender-normative heterosexuality by the end of their respective films. What would it have meant, for instance, if Terry had decided she liked living as a boy, and she and Rick decided to live openly as a gay male couple? Or if Julie responded to Dorothy’s lesbian kiss and accepted her as a trans dyke? Given the conservative ideologies of these films, such a plot development is almost unthinkable. While the male characters get to use their male privilege to inhabit/colonize femaleness and come away as “better men,” Terry inhabiting maleness is much more threatening. In the end, she gets a “smack-down” and is told in no uncertain terms: the playtime is over. You wear the skirt and you best not forget it.

Meanwhile, in the “real” world, trans women continue to pay a high price for simply attempting to live authentically as their true selves, sometimes facing assault or even homicidal violence. Often the rationale given by the overwhelmingly young, straight-identified, cisgender male killer, is that the transgender woman “tricked” him, “deceived” him into thinking that she was something she was not. While there are few if any consequences for such behavior in the “reel” world, the “real” world is not nearly so sanguine about it. Transgender women are killed, not for being who they are not, but for being *who they are*. The trope of deception, circulating throughout our culture, offers powerful ammunition in our continued oppression. Our very lives are often on the line, and there is no retreat into normalcy when the credits roll.
1 For instance, I rather doubt that mostly people think: “well these characters are not really transgender so it is acceptable for me to make fun of them and to laugh at their gender transformation.” People cross-dressing, whether they identify as transgender or not, are often seen by society as something comical. The boundaries between comedic cross-dressing in film, or cross-dressing for a fraternity prank, or cross-dressing for Halloween, or for New Orleans Mardi Gras or the Philadelphia Mummers Parade, are not always firmly demarcated from the activities of a transgender-identified person who cross-dresses to more fully express his/her/hir identity.


3 This was brutally brought home to me when I attempted to legally change my name in the state of New Hampshire. The probate judge refused my name change in a written legal ruling on the basis that the danger of “deception” to the public at large took precedence over my personal desire to have a more female-sounding name. This severe ruling was not entirely a surprise to me because I was also subjected to very personal, inappropriate and irrelevant questioning about my transgender status by the judge.

4 Ray Blanchard’s offensive taxonomy of MTF transsexualism shoehorns transgender women into two distinct groupings: homosexual transsexuals and autogynephilics. Homosexual transsexuals are constructed as feminine gay males who are attracted to masculine, heterosexual men, and transition in order to more easily facilitate a sex life with straight men. Autogynephilia is a paraphilic fetish in which male-bodied people who are attracted to women “get off” on the idea of becoming a woman and physically transition as part of this extended sexual fetish and fantasy life (For a discussion of this paradigm, see The Man Who Would Be Queen by J. Michael Bailey). It is important to note that “homosexual transsexual” is a misnomer because the “homosexual” part is based on the trans women’s assigned sex rather than their correct gender identity. Blanchard and his followers, J. Michael Bailey and Anne Lawrence, contribute to the trope of deception by misnaming transsexual women’s experiences and identities, and assigning motives to their reasons for transitioning that are patently false for the vast majority of transgender women.

5 Among the most prominent of these critiques include Janice Raymond’s theories in The Transsexual Empire and work by Sheila Jeffreys, particularly Unpacking Queer Politics.

6 In this dissertation, I am mostly focusing on narrative and documentary films. However, I see “media culture” as encompassing not only movies but also television programs as well. Here, I add talk shows to the mix because they are so important to understanding the trope of transgender deception in the trans media canon.

7 Examples of The Jerry Springer Show Episodes that deal with transgenderism in some way include: “‘She’ is a He” (9/29/08). “Springer’s Gender Bender Blowout” (11/3/08). “A Godfather, a Tranny and a Midget” (10/17/08). “Cross-Dressing Carny!” (9/27/07). “My Man is a Woman” (6/23/06). “Jerry’s Tranny Special” (9/25/06). “Transsexuals Attacking!” (10/11/06). “I’m Pregnant by a Transsexual” (date unknown). “Tales of the She-Males” (date unknown). Notice epithets like “tranny” and “she-male” are commonly used to further the degradation of gender-variant people and to add ever-more shock value.

8 Whether these guests are “real” or actors is a legitimate question. Talk shows such as The Jerry Springer Show have been “busted” numerous times for featuring stories which were not, in fact, true. People who wanted a free trip to Chicago and their “15 minutes of fame” would concoct outrageous stories in order to get booked on the show. See: “Springer Faces Fake Fight Claims” and “Jerry Springer: Sex, Sin and the Death of All We Hold Sacred” in Rolling Stone Magazine: May 14, 1998.

9 Joshua Gamson has done the most to analyze images of GLBT people on talk shows in his book Freaks Talk Back. In terms of cultural effects, the following quote is helpful: “Talk shows are cliché-mongering entertainment, and to suggest that they effect major paradigm shifts would be to overestimate their cultural effects; they display the radically different mostly in ways that reaffirm the normality of the watchers” (141). Like three-ring sideshows, they function to posit an “other” against which gender-normative people can measure themselves. In many of the shows that Gamson analyzes, however, there are more opportunities for GLBT people to talk back, whereas Springer’s recent shows are so scripted and bizarre that the voice and agency of the guest is severely constrained.
Talk shows have done a spectacularly awful job of presenting that systemic, institutional oppression that transgender people face. Even talk shows that are less offensive than Springer often fail to truly inform people about transphobia and macro-level discrimination against gender-variant people. Often, shows focus a tremendous amount of time on physical transition (hormones, surgery, plastic surgery) etc. or on micro-level issues such as self-acceptance and acceptance from immediate family members. While these are indeed important issues, they tend to overshadow such issues as employment discrimination, homelessness, hate violence and sex survival work in the trans population. The family-oriented shows often create more sympathy for the judgmental family than for the trans person because the trans person was not “honest” about their identity from the beginning and have taken an innocent wife and children hostage to their deviant lifestyle. Most talk shows have a long way to travel to present a more balanced and embracing vision of gender diversity.

I struggle with citing Daly’s work, since her writings are blatantly transphobic. (Like her former student Janice Raymond, she takes a negative view of trans people due to her radical feminist beliefs.) However, I do believe her concept of patriarchal reversal is a useful one for understanding how things are turned on their head to make the victim into a victimizer and make the perpetrator into a victim.

Julia Kristeva defines the notion of “abjection” in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (Translated by Leon S. Roudiez.) It is difficult to define the term as Kristeva utilizes it in such a complex fashion, however it often refers to that which causes nausea or revulsion, such as our reaction to a rotting corpse, and is often used to describe marginalized or oppressed groups. The “space of abjection” in Jerry Springer-land would be the stage itself, where gender nonconforming people, people of color, poor people and others are laughed at and heckled by a normative audience which is ill-equipped to productively deal with their differences. Kristeva writes that abjection is “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4).

The *Maury Povich Show* has done many of these gender guessing game shows. Unfortunately I do not have the dates that the episodes aired, but here are some titles of shows he has done over the years: “Glamour Girls or Sexy Studs?” “You’ll Never Guess…Man or Woman?” “Hot Spring Bunnies or Men Dressed as Honeys?” “Man or Woman? Are they Ballroom Babes or Dancing Dudes?” “Born a Boy or a Girl…You’ll Never Guess.” “Can You Guess… Was I Born a Boy or a Girl?” “Which of These Halloween Honeys is Really a Man?” “New Years Drag Queens: Who’s a Man? Who’s a Woman?”

See *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* by Judith Butler. Also, see *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach* by Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna and *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* by Michel Foucault.

This problem of warring femininities is a staple on the tabloid talk shows. During the studio audience question and comment segment, cisgender women frequently stand up and pronounce that they are “all real” and make gestures to their breasts and buttocks, often to the applause of the men in audience around them. Trans women guests often reply that they are more feminine and more sexually desirable, thus cementing a battle between competing feminine gender expressions. Needless to say, a transfeminist intervention is desperately needed in order to highlight the way women are cast as competitors, the way trans- and cis-femininities are put on display and sexualized by dominant culture, and the way patriarchy is served by disunity between oppressed subjects. But trans and cis women joining together in common feminist solidarity does not, alas, make for riveting television or the attainment of high ratings.

While the male contestants and Miriam are the ones foregrounded in the show, the large production staff is rendered basically invisible. It is the producers who created and set up this troubling format, but I wonder if they are the ones blamed by viewers for its content? While the men on the show did sue the producers for damages, thus assigning blame to them, who is blamed when viewers see the men react to the “horrifying” shock of Miriam’s transsexual status? I worry that this is yet another example of the deceptive trans person being pumped into people’s living rooms all over the world. While Miriam agreeing to sign on to do such a show is problematic, she is more of a pawn in a larger structure of representational practices that further status quo and reactionary cultural ideologies.

The show, entitled “Same-Sex Secret Crushes” was taped in 1995 but never aired in syndication, although it was aired on Court-TV during the murder trial. After his gay neighbor Scott Amedure admitted to having a sexual attraction to him on the show, Jonathan Schmitz appeared to laugh it off. But in actuality it disturbed him greatly and he murdered Amedure three days later. He received 25-50 years for the killing, but the producers and host of the ambush television show *The Jenny Jones Show* were not charged. The
family of Amedure originally won a judgment against the program but a Michigan appellate court overturned the decision.

Recently, a Colorado radio shock jock mocked the death of transgender woman Angie Zapata on his show and basically justified her vicious murder by stating that it was payback for her deception. The host, Trevor Carey, stated "the transgender segment of our society needs to be telling their type" that "you don't commit fraud" because "you're at least gonna get your teeth kicked in." For more on this shocking story, see: [link]


Julia Serano coins the term trans-misogyny in her brilliant book of essays: Whipping Girl. She defines the term as follows: “When a trans person is ridiculed or dismissed not merely for failing to live up to gender norms, but for their expressions of feminality or femininity, they become the victims of a specific form of discrimination: trans-misogyny” (14-15).

One of the key theorists to explicate the notion of homosociality is Eve K. Sedgwick. She writes about the topic in her book Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire. Also, see Michael Kimmel’s Manhood in America.

Brandon Teena was mentioned in Chapter One, as his story was told in both the documentary film The Brandon Teena Story (1998) and the narrativized version Boys Don’t Cry (1999). It should be noted that Just One of the Guys was made in 1985, a full eight years before Brandon was raped and murdered in Nebraska in 1993, and 13 and 14 years, respectively, before the release of the documentary and narrative films about his life. However, Just One of the Guys has gone on to a popularity in VHS and DVD format for home release, making possible speculations about comparisons between the film and Brandon’s Teena’s tragic life.

Two women posing together in mainstream pornography is not only not threatening to heterosexual men, it is seen as a particularly compelling erotic fantasy (See Bunch and Penelope). As long as the women portrayed comply with dominant notions of hyper-femininity, many men fantasize about their sexual involvement with multiple women. However, were these two women portrayed as women of size, as butch or masculine, or as pierced or tattooed, the visual codes change them and mark them as more dangerous and subversive. Many men still feel a sense of mastery over traditionally feminine women, and center their own pleasure and their own desirability as paramount within a “lesbian” sexual transaction.

According to Urban Dictionary.com, “trim” refers to: pussy; usually good (clean, shaved, not used a lot.) “Yo, I heard there gonna be mad trim at that party this week.”

For feminist analyses of rape in patriarchal culture, see: Fraternity Gang Rape by Peggy Sanday; I Never Called It Rape: The Ms. Report on Recognizing, Fighting, and Surviving Date and Acquaintance Rape by Robin Warshaw; and Transforming a Rape Culture, edited by Emilie Buchwald, Pamela Fletcher and Martha Roth.

Recently, a gender identity/expression nondiscrimination bill was defeated in the state of New Hampshire because the group opposing the bill (Focus on the Family) orchestrated a fear-mongering campaign to speciously assert that granting rights to transpeople would enable predators to have access to young females in public restrooms to sexually/physically assault them. For more, see: “Transgender Rights Defeated” by Laura Dorgan.

See: Fraternity Gang Rape: Sex, Brotherhood, and Privilege on Campus by Peggy Sanday

In addition to the male-male coupling here, lesbian panic erupts when Dog House President Leah puts the moves on Daisy. Daisy is frightened because he is afraid he will not be able to hide his erection from Leah when they start to become intimate.

An excellent resource on the police harassment of transgender people (as well as gay and lesbian people) is Stonewalled: Police Abuse and Misconduct Against Lesbian, Gay and Transgender People in the U.S. Authored by Amnesty International, the report documents the torture and mistreatment of gender and sexual minorities by police in American society.

Deception and hiding one’s sexuality and gender are common in U.S. society. These films reference a cultural backdrop of the closet, the down low, and anonymous male-male sex in public spaces. For more on these issues, see: On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of “Straight” Black Men Who Sleep with

On a recent episode of The Dr. Phil Show entitled “Little Boy Lost,” Dr. Phil McGraw discussed the issue of gender-variant children. Two of the “experts” on the show were Glenn Stanton from Focus on the Family and Joseph Nicolosi, founder of NARTH (National Association for Repair and Therapy of Homosexuality.) They contended that gay and trans identity stems from a domineering mother and an absent, unfeeling father figure. They both asserted that these problems can be treated to produce normal masculinity and heterosexuality in young men. Dr. Kenneth Zucker, a psychologist with the Center for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto, Canada, still practices trans-reparatist therapy with youth, trying to mold them into what society sees as normal for their assigned gender.

I fully understand that this is not at all typical for trans identity formation, but, given the film’s lack of connection to reality, at the very least these endings would be very non-traditional and would help to subvert the gender paradigm rather than facilely reinforce its supposed universality and naturalness.
In the previous chapter, we examined the trope of the transgender person as a Deceiver. In addition to creating a limiting stereotype of the transgender person, this reel-world cultural code intersects with already circulating cultural discourses about trans people in the real world. In this chapter, I will examine what I am terming the “Transgender Mammy.” In some ways, this archetype may well seem less insidious and harmful than the Deceiver and certainly less egregious than the Monster, which follows in Chapter Four. However, the trope is more similar to these other transgender tropes than it seems at first glance. It places transgender women into a limited frame and makes them palatable through rendering them as one-dimensional helpmates who prop up heterosexist, gender-normative patriarchy. Transgender Mammies are gender-variant characters in films that are marked by servility and allegiance to hegemony. Unlike the obvious menace of the Monster, or the insidious but telltale dangers of the Deceiver, the Mammy is often comedic and even likable. As we shall see, this ruse covers up the complexity of the trans community, and functions to reinforce both transphobia and the dominant sex/gender order. Before turning to a discussion of filmic examples of the Transgender Mammy, I would like to explore the historical legacy of the Black Mammy in popular culture.

**The Historical Black Mammy**

The genesis of the mammy comes from the social order of African American history. The word “mammy” was previously a variant of the word “mother” but now is
recognized as a racist epithet. Perhaps the most well-known mammy was Aunt Jemima, who served as the trademark image for Aunt Jemima pancakes, mixes and syrups. As K. Sue Jewell writes:

The evolution of the mammy image can be largely attributed to some female slaves being assigned the arduous responsibility of performing domestic duties for the family of the slave owner. Although female slaves performed a multiplicity of duties on the plantation, from working in the fields as laborers, to assuming the primary duties for the slave owner’s household, it is this last function, that became the foundation for imagery that symbolizes African American womanhood (38).

Lisa M. Anderson notes that the image taken from the slave woman was first presented to audiences in the form of the minstrel show. Anderson notes that the mammy is the symbol of black motherhood in the white imagination. However, this motherhood is totally in service to white people. “In essence, then, the mammy is a black woman who focuses her time, love, devotion, and attention on whites, particularly her ‘adopted’ white family, rather than on her own black family” (10). In the depictions of transgender women that follow, their lives are consumed with taking care of other people: friends, family members, neighbors and townspeople. The complexity of their own lives is mostly lost as it is filtered through how they are seen and relate to cisgender, heteronormative people.

Jewell separates the white-constructed mammy from the black-produced image that connotes black women in nurturing roles, such as Lena Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Jewell explains the reason for the very differing role of black woman nurturer and
mammy: “In the representations of whites, black women are constructed as they are seen through the veils of racism and sexism. Their knowledge of the lives of African Americans is restricted by their limited interactions with blacks, and to the historical images with which they are familiar from mass culture… The women exist as though they have no life outside of service to whites” (38). The transgender characters in these films are not written by trans-identified people. Given the many misperceptions of LGBT people, homophobic and transphobic stereotypes are part and parcel of the representations of the Transgender Mammy. The characters’ lack of a life outside of their service to dominant community members is similar to what Jewell describes. Thus, the Transgender Mammy should be differentiated from the trans person who nurtures others, particularly people in the queer and gender-variant communities. Nurturance can be construed as a positive act of care, rooted in reciprocity, in which an empowered trans agent decided to engage. “Mammyhood”, on the other, is an act and illusion constructed by cisgender people for the benefit and maintenance of the dominant social order.

Anderson states that the mammy roles are roles of marginality and service to others. She cogently argues why the mammy is such an insidious invention:

“Interpretation of the myth as a fact seeps through the entire culture, where it is in turn transformed into fact. That is, mammy becomes a cultural code, determining how real black women are seen” (39). As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the cultural codes constructed by media depictions can be significant. The Transgender Mammy stereotype of the “reel world” may help to produce notions of real-life transgender women as loyal helpmates and subordinated sidekicks whose own lives are consistently sacrificed to those with more power.
Anderson continues to describe various facets of the mammy image. In addition to existing to care for the white people, the mammy is deployed for comic relief, and is “rarely taken seriously by white characters” (39). Importantly, Anderson also notes how the mammy is perceived as a threat to the dominant order and to the continued patriarchal power of men. “In many mainstream images, mammies are seen taking control of men, and the alleged threat to the nuclear family is psychologically interpreted as a castrating presence” (40). In all of the films in which I examine the role of the Transgender Mammy, they are cast as funny (for comedic relief) and sassy. Although the sassiness is often aggressive, it is not powerful enough to cut through the status quo power relations.

Jewell also notes that although the antebellum mammy exhibits submissiveness towards her owner during slavery or her employer following emancipation, she displays aggression towards other African Americans. In addition, Jewell notes that the mammy is the “antithesis of the American conception of womanhood. She is portrayed as an obese African American woman, of dark complexion, with extremely large breasts and buttocks and shining white teeth visibly displayed in a grin” (39). Although the mammy is portrayed as assertive and powerful, there are boundaries to acceptable behavior: “Mammy’s verbal assertiveness is tolerated when she is giving advice to her mistress or employer. In such instances she assumes a caring and nurturing role. However, when she is perceived by her mistress or employer as ‘pushy’ she is quickly admonished and returned to her position of submissiveness and subordination” (42). Thus, the “powerfulness” of the mammy is not really power at all when it comes to confronting those with true positions of privilege. The appearance of the transgender women/drag queens in the films analyzed in this chapter is flamboyant, colorful and over-the-top.
They are almost always hyper-feminine and dressed to elicit attention from the cisgender public. Like the separation between Black and White women, the transgender women are presented to produce a demarcation between them and cisgender women. Sartorial codes are utilized to make this distinction to uphold cisgender dominance. If the clothing and appearance of the trans-feminine characters is over-the-top in its flamboyance, then cissexual females can continue to see them as males dressed as women rather than as women. Dress is coded along lines of race, gender, class and sexuality to demarcate the boundaries of different social groupings. Although these boundaries can be contested through subversive dressing, these films uphold a difference between cis- and trans women rather than minimize or eliminate such a line.

The legacy and impact of the mammy on American society and representation cannot be underestimated. As Anderson writes “the icon of the mammy is probably the most recognizable and longest perpetuated image of African American women in American society, and it has been reproduced again and again on stage and screen” (9). The impact of the image of the Transgender Mammy I describe in this chapter is just emerging and does not contain a fraction of the power of its historical predecessor. However, I believe its effects will be to similarly constrain another minority group.

The heyday of the mammy representation in cinema was in the 1930s. Donald Bogle, discussed in Chapter One, penned a definitive history of African American images in cinema entitled *Tom, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*. He writes the following regarding mammies and their emergence on screen:

> Mammy, the fourth black type, is so closely related to the comic coons that she is usually relegated to their ranks. Mammy is distinguished,
however, by her sex and her fierce independence. She is usually big, fat, and cantankerous. She made her debut around 1914 when audiences were treated to a blackface version of Lysistrata. The comedy, titled Coon Town Suffragettes, dealt with a group of bossy mammy washerwomen who organize a militant movement to keep their good-for-nothing husbands at home…Mammy’s offshoot is the aunt jemima, sometimes derogatorily referred to as a ‘handkerchief head.’ Often aunt jemimas are toms blessed with religion or mammies who wedge themselves into the dominant white culture. Generally they are sweet, jolly, and good tempered—a bit more polite than mammy and certainly never as headstrong. (9) 

In addition to helping and improving, Krin Gabbard uses the language of “magic” and “enchantment” to discuss similar stereotypes that adhere to the mammy and African Americans more generally:

Because white culture has assigned black culture a central role in its own self-definition while simultaneously marginalizing or erasing black people, the films that perpetuate this project must often resort to what I have called magic. I use this term literally to describe a group of films in which African American actors play angels who improve the lives of whites; I use the term metaphorically to describe the enchanting effect that black music, black sexuality, and other aspects of African American culture have on white characters, more often than not when the characters on screen are white. (6)
Although not talking directly about the mammy archetype, Krim’s work also explores African Americans as helpmates, as angels and as persons who exist to better the lives of their oppressors. Spike Lee comments on the emergence of the “magical nigger” in popular film. “These films all have these magical, mystical Negroes who show up as some sort of spirit or angel but only to benefit the white characters” (Fuchs 205). The “magical” Transgender Mammy comes through in several of the films examined in this chapter, where they are almost portrayed as guardian angel figures who come to save the day and fix other people’s problems.

In her important text *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammys*, Patricia A. Turner discusses stereotypes of African Americans in mass media as well as in cultural artifacts like cookie jars, figurines and collectibles. Turner describes mammy figures in-depth: “Mammy/auntie figures constitute the most frequently depicted characters in the realm of contemptible collectibles. Draped in calico from head to toe, Aunt Jemima and her cronies pose no sexual threat to their white mistresses. They want to nourish rather than seduce white men… An indispensable component of mammy’s equipment is her toothy smile. She is happy to make your pancakes and wash your clothes” (emphasis mine, 24-25). The significance of the Aunt Jemima stereotype is truly powerful. As we shall see, The Transgender Mammy is also presented in ways that pose no sexual threat to their gender-normative oppressors. Aunt Jemima is perhaps the most precise distillation of all of the mammy image stereotypes. Turner writes:

Aunt Jemima appealed to the American public’s desire to imagine a harmonious relationship between black women and white families.

Entrusted with the most important meal of the day, Aunt Jemima allowed
the customer to construct a nurturing scenario in which gracious black
women committed themselves to the care and feeding of white families.
The scenario was so compelling that generation after generation of
American consumer has embraced it and maintained a steadfast allegiance
to Aunt Jemima products” (50).

I believe that films featuring the Transgender Mammy similarly appeal to the
American public’s desire for a non-contentious relationship between heterosexuals and
the LGBT community. In this way, they can sugarcoat over glaring interpersonal
tensions and structural inequalities. The relationship between transgender people and
cisgender people is one marked by hostility, prejudice and mutual mistrust. Although the
films I discuss here do allude to these problems, they often minimize the scope of the
problem in favor of a rosier state of affairs. Many cisgender people maintain an
“allegiance” to cultural products such as mammy movies because they conceal real-world
power relations and produce a thoroughly subordinated minority subject that conforms to
the desires of dominant class.

Turner notes that although the brilliant activist Ida B. Wells has been featured on
a United States postage stamp, and although her contributions to American society are
numerous and incredibly profound, most Americans would have an easier time
identifying Aunt Jemima’s image than that of Ms. Wells. The message is clear: the
attributes of Aunt Jemima are preferable to many whites than those of a radical and
revolutionary activist. While Wells issues a provocative challenge to white Americans to
destroy white supremacy in all its forms, the mythical Aunt Jemima comforted whites
and issued notice that things really were not that bad after all.\(^5\)
Turner cogently sums up the appeal of the mammy in the following quotation: “Mammies allow the public to indulge in wishful thinking. The idea that a selfless, sexless, black woman might want to come into your kitchen and organize your household has retained a persistent hold on the American imagination. But it is not now, and never was, true” (61). The transgender subjects presented in these films are not true, either. They are manufactured and de-fanged drag divas that accord with the already existing norms of heteropatriarchy.

As in other chapters, I would like to ask if there is an alternate way to decode the messages in these films. One possibility is that the expertise and advice of gender-variant people is genuinely sought after in these movies. In this sense, trans people are positioned as “experts” to help advance the lives of cissexual people; often, trans people in hegemonic culture are cast as “crazy” and uneducated and therefore not worthy of dispensing advice. In addition, the colorful style and fabulousness of the trans people is seen as a worthwhile antidote to spice up and enliven the gray and routine lives of the heterosexual majority. Hence, the subcultural styles associated with LGBT cultures and communities, typically scorned or ignored by dominant society, are held up and seen as useful and productive. Finally, despite radical critiques that blast the supposed politically unsophisticated ideologies of these films, they are, in fact, positioned in a way to promote acceptance, liberal tolerance and understanding, and this can potentially help to dislodge both entrenched homophobia and transphobia, and promote better relations between straight and queer citizens. One acquaintance told me that she sees these films as “back-door approaches” that utilizes humor to reach those who sit on the fence. Because they are positioned as light comedies or comedy-dramas, they can possibly affect changes in
attitudes without resorting to heavy-handed moralizing or didactic melodrama. While I see each of these as legitimate counter-points to the arguments I make in this Chapter, for the most part I do not agree with them. As I will demonstrate, none of these arguments are attentive enough to power: how it circulates, who it benefits and who it oppresses. In addition, a “positive” stereotype (fabulous and stylish; loyal helpmates; selfless and devoted, etc.) is still a stereotype. Many might contend that being good at math is a positive trait to possess, but when it is asserted that “Asian Americans are good at math” it creates a stereotype that limits, constrains and frames a diverse and monolithic group of people in troubling ways. Nonetheless, given the polysemic nature of texts in culture, I will return to these counter-arguments in the chapter to acknowledge alternate possible readings.

Using Mammy in a Different Context

I struggled with using the terminology of “mammy” to describe this particular archetype. I am wary of uprooting the term “mammy” from its proper cultural and historical context. There is a long history of African American cultural artifacts being appropriated by the dominant culture for their own usage and benefit. Although the Transgender Mammy shares many of the characteristics with its African American predecessor, it still risks the danger of dislocating a cultural knowledge that has an already firm explanatory power. In examining the emergence of the cinematic Transgender Mammy, I would like to describe three characteristics that I find particularly important. Firstly, the Transgender Mammy is a helpmate who solves other people’s problems and takes care of other people. Through the realization of selflessness, the Transgender Mammy is able to achieve a usefulness that renders her more palatable to
mainstream audiences. Secondly, the Transgender Mammy is represented as asexual or sexually dysfunctional, incapable of forming healthy romantic relationships of her own, or seemingly uninterested in doing so. This plays into dominant stereotypes and cuts off an important part of life to the trans community. Thirdly, the “sassy” and always comedic representation of the transgender mammy is limiting. While certainly there are “sassy” and funny transgender women, trans women have a complex emotional landscape like everyone else and this complexity is ignored or minimized by cardboard representations. This is particularly the case with the representation of intra-trans community relations, where trans women often treat other trans women with a lack of respect, to the amusement of their gender-normative peers.

There is a certain way that the Transgender Mammy intersects with racial identities and cultural racism. Of the six characters addressed in this chapter, four are people of color. Thus, rather than seeing the transfer of the mammy archetype from one of race to one of (trans)gender, the move here does not let go of race. In fact, although I am centrally exploring the mammy as a transgender character, race and racism are still very much deployed within the Transgender Mammy filmic texts to follow. It is difficult to analyze these films in depth without employing an intersectional, critical lens. The remainder of this essay will examine three films in depth—To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar (1995), Holiday Heart (2000), and Flawless (1999) for the various ways they communicate limiting cultural codes to the viewing audience, even as they simultaneously communicate a message of liberal pluralism. To Wong Foo perpetuates a variety of outdated stereotypes and is troubling for its racism, sexism and homophobia. In particular, I will focus on the way in which drag queens are presented as
mammies who exist to provide solace, make things pretty and maintain
heteronormativity. Through rendering queer subjects as apolitical, asexual/sexually
dysfunctional and as preservers of the dominant order, *To Wong Foo* and the other films
manage to incorporate surface gender and sexual transgression while also functioning to
mostly delimit any reference to real socio-cultural transformation.

*To Wong Foo: Thanks for Nothing!*

*To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* was released to theaters in
1995. It was produced by Steven Spielberg’s Amblin Entertainment company and was
directed by Beeban Kidron and written by Douglas Carter Beane. It tells the story of
three drag queens: matriarch Vida Boheme (Patrick Swayze), sassy Noxeema Jackson
(Wesley Snipes) and ingénue Chi Chi Rodriguez (John Leguizamo). The film begins in
New York, where the three queens are competing in a drag pageant in which the grand
prize is a free trip to Los Angeles. Vida and Noxeema tie as winners, but go home to find
young Chi Chi crying on their doorstep. They decide to sell the plane tickets and buy a
car so that Chi Chi can join them on their trip to LA. The film then becomes a classic
road picture, with scenes of the three queens bonding, until their car is stopped for
speeding by a bigoted cop. The cop tries to rape Vida and she punches him to defend
herself. He falls to the ground and the queens mistakenly believe that Vida has killed
him. The cop finds out that the three queens are not biologically female and goes to
much trouble to track them down. After they escape, their car breaks down in the
(fictitious) town of Snydersville, somewhere in the Midwest. The queens proceed to win
over the small-minded citizenry of Snydersville by bringing humor and color to the
townspeople’s colorless, gray world, and by helping them solve a number of their own
social problems such as ending a domestic battery situation and doing a bit of matchmaking to bring a young couple together. The cop eventually finds them, but the townspeople rally to the queens’ side, declaring that they, too, are drag queens. Eventually their car gets fixed and they make it to Los Angeles in time to compete in the national pageant, where the real life Julie Newmar makes a brief cameo.

It quickly becomes apparent to viewers with a critical eye that *To Wong Foo* is all style over substance. Writing in *The Advocate*, Riki Wilchins states: “‘Let’s Camp Out’ films—*Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, Tootsie, The Rocky Horror Picture Show, Mrs. Doubtfire, To Wong Foo*—deflect viewers’ discomfort with old, outdated stereotypes by introducing new, outdated gender stereotypes. These films tend to be fun—if sometimes surreal—RuPaul romps, centered on the pleasure of acting out while dressing up. Issues of gender disappear under a tangle of décolletage and slut pumps” (26). The film utilizes what Kathryn Kane terms “queerface.” Referencing the blackface minstrelsy tradition, she describes queerface as where “heteronormativity is secured and queer voices are silenced through the performance of homosexuality by people who act out a vision of homosexuality while simultaneously identifying themselves as heterosexual… Queerface involves representing gay/lesbian sexual identity as a playful performance that supports heteronormative ideals” (5). Upon seeing this film, a friend of mine called it a “straight film trying to be queer.” This reaction very much accords with the notion of queerface. The film acts out a crude surface queerness while attempting to conceal a strongly heterosexist core and foundation. It is this commitment to hegemonic cultural ideologies, dressed up in the accoutrements of neoliberalism, which makes the film so insidious.

Early in the film, the queens go to a used car lot to pick out a vehicle for their
cross-country trek. They settle on a choice between two cars, an old Cadillac convertible and a Toyota Corolla. Rather than choose the more practical of the two cars, the queens decide to buy the Cadillac because of its style—its perceived glamour. Some would contend that this perpetuates the stereotype that women, gay and transgender people are obsessed with the aesthetic rather than the pragmatic. Also, racial minorities are often criticized by the dominant bourgeoisie for their interest in flashy things (“bling”) and for not being “practical” when it comes to managing money or purchasing items. A “politics of fabulousness” can be one strategy for disrupting bourgeois notions of drabness, conformity and adherence to white, middle-class values. And yet, the film neglects a painful cultural reality. Biological males who dress and/or live as women are the frequent targets of violence in this culture. A newer car would have less chance of breaking down and thereby provide added safety and security. Sure, the three look fabulous in the older convertible, but sure enough, the car breaks down later, thereby indirectly commenting on their poor judgment. The director and writer of this film appear to be blissfully ignorant of the realities of transgender existence in the United States, opting instead for a fairy tale approach. While they certainly have every right to create a fairy tale, they also seem to want to have a real-world application in terms of making people more tolerant of sexual diversity and presenting social problems such as domestic abuse. I contend that this is a case of wanting to have it both ways. Noxeema Jackson is the one character who, at several points in the film, comments on the need for safety, but she is quickly shouted down by the other characters and told to lighten up. One of the key problems with To Wong Foo is its thorough inability to include the issues of gender, “passing,” and visibility. This harkens back to our discussion of “passing” in
Chapter One, where Tootsie et. al. never struggle to be perceived or accepted in their new gender role. When our queens are still on the road to Los Angeles, they arrive at a small town hotel and are met by a hotel worker who enthusiastically ushers them to a female basketball players’ convention room. They are similarly greeted in the small town of Syndersville when they arrive. One town resident comments that “they sure are big,” but they are regarded as women. This is a typical trend in media culture, whereby males dressed as women are universally accepted and regarded as female. The maxim “what you see is what you get” is the prevailing ideology that guides many films and television shows. Gender is a socially constructed fiction that is also a prescribed cultural category. However, the commonsensical way of understanding gender continues to assert that there is always a correspondence between bodily surface (“sex”) and outward cultural expression (“gender”). Because these queens ostensibly “look like” women, dominant logic insists they are also biologically female. While it appears that the film incorporates a critique of this dominant logic through the inclusion of these three drag queen characters, in actuality the binary sex/gender system is upheld through the use of constant “passing” in the filmic narrative. The vast majority of drag queens live part, if not most, of their lives as men. And yet, apart from a brief scene at the beginning, we never see the queens out of drag. Their appearance in hyper-feminine drag is like the calico dress and head-rag of the black mammy, a costume meant to domesticate, de-fang and reassure dominant viewers through suppressing racialized and gendered anxieties.

In his performance piece Mambo Mouth, John Leguizamo’s character “The Cross-Over King” states the following: “Crossing over is the art of passing for someone that you are not in order to get something that you have not.” This witty aphorism sums
up the basic principle operating within the institution of passing: the denial of identity in order to receive the power that is disproportionately and unfairly possessed by people in the dominant, hegemonic social locations and groupings.\(^7\)

In *To Wong Foo*, “passing” as an important social and political issue (like in Chapter One), is simply not dealt with. I believe this is done because the threat of *not* passing is simply too dangerous and complex a theme for the film to credibly take on. Due to this sidestepping of a crucial topic, *To Wong Foo* not only loses credibility but also comes off as highly irresponsible. At the end of the film, one of the townsfolk, Carol Ann (Stockard Channing) states that she knew Vida was not a biological female because she noticed that Vida has an Adam’s apple. In this instance, Vida does not “pass” as a female, but there are no consequences for it. In fact, Carol Ann states that she is “fortunate to have a lady friend who just happens to have an Adam’s apple.” This might be an instance of harmless Hollywood sentimentality were it not for the fact that real life gender transgressions *do* have consequences, and often life-threatening ones at that.

*To Wong Foo* was filmed in Nebraska, which makes its careless rendering of gender transgression all the more problematic. As mentioned in the earlier chapters, Brandon Teena was brutally raped and murdered in the small Nebraska town of Humboldt in 1994. While Brandon had “passed” as male in the small town of Humboldt, he was discovered to be biologically female after his birth name was printed in the local paper. It is not my contention to state that *To Wong Foo*, which, despite its lack of successful humor is clearly meant to be in the comedy genre, has an absolute moral responsibility to take on these issues. I do understand that it has a distinctly “fairy tale” approach that necessarily assigns it a different relationship to “reality” than other genres.
Still, I believe it is important to point out the startling disparity between this Midwestern fantasy world and the actual existence of that world for gender-transgressive subjects.

The historical Black Mammy was often represented as happy-go-lucky. This image was commonplace, despite the omnipresent realities of racism. In the era of Jim Crow, while African Americans were denied the right to eat at a lunch counter or drink from a water fountain marked “whites only”, and a large number of black men were being lynched in the South, film presented Black Mammy as sassy but always reliable and content, taking care of white families to the detriment of her own. While transgender people face huge rates of unemployment, brutal hate crimes and high suicide rates, in the “reel-world” of To Wong Foo we are flouncing, larger-than-life buffoons, eager to make life more pretty for our oppressors. Further, even though To Wong Foo is a comedy, it does (to its detriment) take on serious subjects such as police brutality, attempted rape, and domestic violence. Given the narrative and generic constraints of the film, it handles all of these issues sloppily, and at times dangerously. Like the mammy of historical cinema, the transgender mammy tells mistruths to viewing audiences that have real-world effects.

Towards the middle of the film, drag ingénue Chi Chi is surrounded by a group of white male Snydersville thugs who accost her with the intention of a gang rape. Chi Chi is “rescued” by white male resident heart-throb/cowboy Bobby Ray (Jason London). The serious implications of an attempted rape against a transperson of color are derided, as noted by Mary Kirk:

When Chi Chi is nearly gang-raped by four white boys in an isolated field, the solution is to have Bobby Ray speed up in his truck to rescue her—the
luxury of an instant chauffeur is not an option for most victims of gang rape. The potential seriousness of the scene is undercut even further when Chi Chi quips to her would-be assailant out the truck window as she’s speeding off with Bobby Ray: “That’s how you pick up a lady.” This remark trivializes a very dangerous situation in several ways: it minimizes the seriousness of the situation, it suggests that “real” women want to be rescued/protected by a man, and it suggests (not so subtly) that women “really want it.” The latter may be the most insidious message, since it has taken decades of work by feminist activists and legal scholars to attempt to correct this institutionalized belief. I guess we have not come a long way, baby. (Kirk 177)

I wholeheartedly agree with Kirk’s reading, but I would also add the layer of Chi Chi’s liminal gender status as another complicating feature. If Bobby Ray had not raced to save Chi Chi from the would-be rapists and had they discovered Chi Chi’s biological sex, it is probable that she would have paid for this discovery with her life. The real-life case of Latina, transgender teen Gwen Araujo of California and Angie Zapata of Colorado are painful reminders of the ways in which trans/drag/queer bodies of color are treated in a heteropatriarchal, white-supremacist society. Araujo was murdered in 2002 after several young men with whom she had allegedly been sexually active discovered that she was biologically male. The assailants went into a so-called “gay panic” and used this as an excuse for the murder. Zapata was an eighteen-year old transgender Latina who was murdered in Greeley, Colorado in 2008 by a man who was outraged to discover that Zapata was trans, in fact, male. Allen Ray Andrade was arrested in the case and had
referred to Zapata as an “it” to a Greeley police detective. He allegedly told his girlfriend in a phone call that he had “snapped” and that “gay things need to die.” Many of the gender variant people listed on the “Remembering Our Dead” website are young and are people of color. Not only does the filmic narrative of To Wong Foo evade this painful reality, but it makes a farcical joke out of the situation. The sexual and physical assaults and murders of transpeople make painfully evident the very real social penalties that are constantly meted out for daring to defy hegemonic gender conventions in American society. Instead of dealing with this bigotry square in the face, To Wong Foo sidesteps heterosexism and transphobia by depoliticizing it and by trying to render drag queens as angelic and helpful mammies for the maintenance of heteropatriarchal power arrangements. Previous cinematic mammies were similarly portrayed as serving those in power and doing it with a smile on their face. While the ubiquity of harsh and violent racism swirled around them, the Black Mammy existed to ease the guilty conscious of the white oppressor and legitimate the status quo power relations.

David Ansen writes, “From the brilliant Some Like it Hot to the laborious To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar, Hollywood has embraced cross-dressing as the safest way to pitch gayness to a mass audience. Drag queens are the cinema’s favorite naughty pets, harmless if not quite housebroken” (71). The thoroughly domesticated Transgender Mammies of To Wong Foo are made harmless through several important means. Firstly, they are funny, colorful, entertaining and above all helpful. The drag queens immediately turn their drab Snydersville hotel room into a fabulous and colorful oasis, becoming “Magical Trannies.” African American Noxeema Jackson, in a particularly acute revitalization of the mammy role, makes friends with an old white lady
named Clara (Alice Drummond) who has not spoken for years. Noxeema brings this old woman out of her shell by dishing about old movie stars. Meanwhile, Vida intervenes in Carol Ann’s life by confronting her abusive husband and helping to boost Carol Ann’s self-esteem. All the queens use their talent to give makeovers to the town’s cadre of plain-Jane women and add a touch of glamour and elegance to their drab existences. As Kathryn Kane writes:

While stranded in the middle of America, the “colorful” trio wakes up a sleepy town and adds meaning to the lives of the washed out, tired, and abused women they encounter. The film positions the drag queen, with their racial, gendered and sexual differences, as a means of liberation available to those laboring under the burden of normativity. Their presence releases these rural folk, particularly the women, from their stilted, unsatisfying lives and facilitates a new sense of empowerment. I question this structure, which allows a small, almost exclusively white and indicatively heterosexual community to actualize itself through contact with and eventual separation from the sexual and racial others. (3)

Another “helping” gesture is the way the queens collaborate to ensure the burgeoning courtship of Bobby Ray and Bobby Lee (Jennifer Milmore). This maneuver coincides with another central tactic of making transpeople palatable to mainstream audiences: hiding and/or distorting their sexuality. Like the historical mammy figure, their sexuality is either invisibilized or portrayed as dysfunctional. Instead, they are portrayed as primarily caring about the love lives of the dominant population: gender-normative, heterosexual, cisgender people.
Bobby Ray develops a crush on drag princess Chi Chi, and Chi Chi considers pursuing this mutual attraction. But matriarch Vida quickly condemns this possibility, and instructs her drag daughter on proper sexual etiquette. “You are deceiving that child. That boy does not know which end is up. And you know for a fact that Miss Bobby Lee is in love with him… I will not allow you to play games with other people. There are human rules by which we operate sweetheart.” Chi Chi is instructed in no uncertain terms that for her to pursue a relationship with Bobby Ray constitutes a sort of gender deception that is morally reprehensible, harkening back to the deception theme in the previous chapter. To make matters worse, it is trans people themselves that are enforcing the idea that a flirtation is an act of deception. Such a moralistic teaching, emanating from the figure of the drag queen mother, replicates dominant understandings of sex, gender and sexual orientation. Clearly, the film is endorsing a drag queen identity as both helpmate and as asexual mammy; the three queens act in concert to deny Chi Chi’s sexual agency and to reconsolidate heteronormative relationships. The queens complete this mission by dressing up Bobby Lee in the accoutrements of hyper-femininity and advising her to appeal to Bobby Ray in ways consistent with patriarchal, heterosexist conditioning.

Near the film’s finale, Carol Ann states to Vida: “I don’t think of you as a man and I don’t think of you as a woman. I think of you as an angel.” In her article “Drag Queen as Angel,” Joyce Hammond fleshes out an argument that the drag queens really do represent angels in this film, and she celebrates the limited role allotted drag queens by the To Wong Foo producers.

In keeping with the significant role credited to drag queens in taking a
stance against the harassment of gay men during the 1969 Stonewall riots, the role in *To Wong Foo* is one of catalyst for societal change. Like angels who serve as guardians, guides, healers, comforters, warriors, and messengers, the drag queens of *To Wong Foo* descend upon a small town that is in need of transformative acts performed with love. The changes they set in motion are ones that allow the heterosexual residents of the Midwestern town to resolve problems within their own ranks. Troubled heterosexual relationships marred by sexual harassment, domestic violence, infidelity and racism, are righted through the drag queens’ angelic acts. On the basis of the four principles under which “true” drag queens operate (namely, thinking good thoughts, ignoring adversity, abiding by the rules of love and acting larger than life), the drag queens teach the townspeople the real meaning of love.

Hammond’s argument is almost the exact antithesis of my own. To compare the sanitized, Hollywood drag queen mammys manufactured in *To Wong Foo* for the amusement of a mass audience to real-life activist warriors like Sylvia Rivera\(^\text{10}\) and Marsha P. Johnson\(^\text{11}\) of the Stonewall Rebellion is both specious and patently offensive. Hammond’s inability to see the way that these queens are mediated constructions with little or no resemblance to real life dramatically mars her argument. Viewers desiring an exploration of drag identity rooted more closely in reality rather than fantasy would do well to watch Nigel Finch’s *Stonewall* (1996), which includes an honest exploration of the brutality and bigotry faced by the queens who helped usher in a new era of gay and transgender politics and visibility. Hammond does not see the way that the drag queens’
service to others is in maintaining societal boundaries and bigotries, not eradicating or minimizing them. Through casting the drag queens as magical fairies and angelic mammy figures, the film sets up a clear demarcation between “normal” townsfolk and the gender-variant “others” who are quite literally cast as other-worldly. Because they are depicted in such an exoticizing fashion, the drag queen’s real life concerns are repeatedly eclipsed by their loving devotion to the heterosexual townspeople. When bigotry is raised at all, as it is through the caricature of Sheriff Dullard (Chris Penn), it is treated as a laughing matter and, significantly, as the problem of one prejudiced person who is bigoted due to his own latent homosexuality. As Kane notes: “With a character like Dullard, To Wong Foo makes a mockery of the idea that society is racist or heterosexist. Though there are moments throughout the film where Vida and Noxeema fear an oppressive social structure, the narrative always exposes their fears as unnecessary” (15). Bigotry is cast as the result of prejudiced individuals, when in fact it stems from societal institutional and macro-level power structures. This micro-level politics of the heart (Hammond’s new-age “transcendent power of love”) does little to illuminate the systemic problems of racism, sexism, heterosexism and transphobia.

The “positive” stereotypes attributed to drag queens might be read by some as an important step forward. There is a tradition, for instance, of representing cross-dressing/transsexual subjects as sociopathic monsters—a theme I take up in Chapter Four—in films such as Psycho (1960), Dressed to Kill (1980) and The Silence of the Lambs (1991), among others, in order to demonize them and justify hatred against them. The “new” representation offered by To Wong Foo and similar films is not so much a progressive alternative as an oppositional recasting. Whether transpeople are cast as
monsters or angels, they are still *framed* by cisgender people in stultifying ways that deny their complexity and multidimensionality. Robert Brookey and Robert Westerfelhaus term this trend “deification” and note that it is merely the antithesis of demonization. “The superior traits attributed to those who are deified are ones that either pose no threat to the established order or serve to reaffirm that order” (144). In the film under analysis, the angelic qualities attributed to the drag queens are stylistic and fluffy, and do not pose a threat to the maintenance of the dominant gender paradigm. In fact, as Walters points outs, the subjects of *To Wong Foo* are “primarily engaged in the reconstitution of heterosexual romance” (142).

In his book *Freaks Talk Back*, Joshua Gamson explores the representation of GLBT people in daytime television talk shows. He discusses the use of drag queens and trans women in beauty pageants and gender guessing games. Gamson writes, “On the one hand, gender-crossers fare quite well in these display formats, which more or less preclude moral condemnations. But more significantly, they escape such disapproval simply because they are not taken seriously enough to be subject to evaluation one way or another. Why bother condemning a harmless jester?” (133-34). Similarly, *To Wong Foo* removes drag queens from the realm of reality in order to avoid the messy questions which arise from radically deconstructing normalizing discourses of gender and sexuality. By presenting the queens as “harmless jesters,” viewers are not required to interrogate their own subject position or to question the omnipresence of cultural barriers to genuine equality and liberation. In a related vein, Brookey and Westerfelhaus note that an important component of deification is the “cultural, and even physical, isolation that it imposes upon those so defined. Because they are defined as being above the mainstream,
the deified can easily be removed from it” (144). The removal of transgressive gender identities from the fray puts them in a position of disadvantage; whether they are placed “above” (deities) or “below” (monsters) the mainstream, the impulse of “othering” is equally maintained. In this way, the boundaries between gay and straight, male and female, and cisgendered and transgendered are aggressively monitored, policed and maintained. The inability to achieve goals in society is blamed on a lousy attitude rather than on persistent structural inequalities. Kane writes that while To Wong Foo “links the social interest in race to the social interest in gender and sexuality, it does so in a way that substantiates white and heterosexual privilege, thereby offering only the most superficial understanding of women, homosexuals and people of color” (20).

This point is often most strikingly represented by the queens themselves. When Noxeema Jackson exhibits fear and trepidation at the barriers that face her in U.S. society, white matriarch Vida Boheme tells her to simply adjust her attitude. At the end of the film, Noxeema declares: “I’m not going to worry if people accept me or not. I’m gonna make Hollywood wherever I am at.” Similarly, Vida decides that she will no longer seek acceptance from her wealthy parents of her gay/drag identity, stating that their approval is “not needed.” In these two examples, macro-level political struggle against entrenched societal bigotry is eschewed in favor of pop-psychology and rosy outlooks on life. Noxeema’s desire to create Hollywood wherever she is located is particularly illuminating given the ways that Hollywood is a world exemplified by illusions, simulations and imitations. In Kidron’s fairy-tale realm, drag queens exist to service others, to comfort heterosexual society in order to legitimate their own right to exist. That To Wong Foo’s tag line is “Attitude is Everything” is significant; the film is
premised on the notion that attitudinal adjustments are what is needed to create a happy life rather than coalitional politics and social movements.

In addition, making friends with the “other” is also stressed in the film. We will see this theme repeated in *Flawless* later on. “Homophobia is depoliticized and decontextualized by reducing it to the bigotry and/or ignorance that results from simply not knowing any gay people personally. Just get to know me, these films seem to say, and you will surely ‘accept’ me” (Walters 142). This mode of thinking fits squarely within certain strands of multiculturalism and neo-liberalist discourse. The importance of individual relationships can indeed be profound and transformative in some instances. I do not mean to diminish the importance of personal relationships, but they are not a substitution for engaged and long term political organizing and engagement. I am sure many of the whites who had mammies servicing their homes thought that they had positive relationships with them. But the viewpoint of those in power is often markedly different from those who are being subordinated. The very casting of Swayze and Snipes, two high-profile and hyper-masculine action-movie stars, assuages viewers by reminding them that this is simply about macho guys in frocks. Swayze and Snipes were eager to remind viewers in numerous press articles that they are stalwart heterosexuals, a meta-textual reminder of their “normality” (Walters 140) even as many praised them for their “bravery” in portraying these “deviant” social outcasts. These meta-textual elements aside, it is the filmic narrative itself that most asserts drag queens as helpful, ego boosting and unthreatening to the straight world.¹⁴

Jose Esteban Muñoz discusses the way that drag has been produced for mass commercialization and the political implications of this move. Through their emphasis
on liberal pluralism and individual respect, mainstream films perpetuate the problem by avoiding an engaged dialogue with macro-level, institutional power imbalances. “I want to suggest that this ‘boom’ in drag helps one understand that a liberal-pluralist mode of political strategizing only eventuates a certain absorption, but nothing like a productive engagement, with difference…the erosion of gay civil rights is simultaneous with the advent of higher degrees of queer visibility in the mainstream media” (85). *To Wong Foo* presents characters that are diverse in terms of race, gender and sexuality, and makes them slavishly uphold the dominant paradigm of oppression. As Kane succinctly sums up the film: “*To Wong Foo* serves to support a hegemonic order that uses racial prejudice to support heterosexism and vice versa. This system leaves those outside of the heteronormative order, whether queer, colored, non-gender normative, or any combination of these three, no space from which they might counter the logics of neoliberalism and no space from which they can build a liberatory coalition” (20). The Transgender Mammy character is not interested in the empowerment of her trans sisters but in propping up the dominant order through reassuring cisgender people, heterosexuals and white people that she is not a threat to their continued positions of dominance.

To return to counter-perspectives on these texts, it is indeed possible to envision some viewers becoming more open to issues of gender and sexual diversity through watching this film. Precisely because the film is so unthreatening, some spectators may let their guard down to think in an alternative fashion about issues that normally raise their blood pressure. However, the education they are receiving about transgender and queer issues tends to, as Wilchins wrote, “deflect viewers’ discomfort with old, outdated stereotypes by introducing new, outdated gender stereotypes.” While the new Mammy
stereotype may arguably be preferable to the Monster stereotype or the tragic victim stereotype, its limited framing of trans identity reproduces hegemonic subject positions. I do feel that “straight” cissexual viewers can conceivably feel an air of superiority and condescension when viewing the Mammy trope on screen. Thus, steps forward in understanding are simultaneously bound up in regressive ideologies and stereotypes. In addition, the film is woefully lacking in analyses of power (and even make a mockery of such themes) and thus foreground a “reel-world” liberalism that makes understanding “real-world” transphobic oppression all the more difficult.

Now, I would like to discuss two similar films to continue tracing the ideology suggested by the emergence of the Transgender Mammy.

*Holiday Heart: or, a Heart-Warming, Drag Queen Christmas*

*Holiday Heart* (2000) is a made-for-cable (Showtime) film directed by Robert Townsend and written by Cheryl L. West, based on her play. The film follows the life and times of Holiday, an African American drag queen who lives and works in Chicago. The very first scene features Holiday dressed as a man playing piano and singing in the church choir. The second scene shows Holiday performing the song “Baby Love” in drag at a nightclub, The Penthouse. Holiday is busy planning a trip to Paris when the unexpected happens. She meets a woman and her daughter and helps the woman get away from her abusive boyfriend. She allows them to stay in the empty apartment unit across the hall from her until they can get on their feet. Wanda, the mother, is a writer battling a drug addiction and trying to get clean, while her daughter, Niki, is yearning for love and stability in her young life.
When Wanda comes over to Holiday’s with an unappetizing casserole for dinner, Holiday declares that she will do all the cooking from now on. She also does Wanda’s makeup and takes her to a church member’s business to help her secure employment. Wanda attends the nightclub where Holiday works and meets a heterosexual man named Silas, who says: “What’s a fine woman like you doing in a place with all these fags?” Silas and Wanda soon start dating and begin to shun Holiday because of their homophobia, including keeping Niki away from her. We discover that Silas is a drug-dealer and Wanda quickly gets hooked on crack again, a move that begins a downward spiral. Holiday’s best friend, Blue, tells Holiday that she “ain’t superman” and yet she intervenes in order to ensure that Niki receives quality care. Soon both Silas and Wanda have left the apartment, which leaves Holiday to take care of Niki.

Niki apologizes to Holiday for the way she has been treated, and Holiday brings Niki to her church to be baptized. Wanda returns to the apartment and tries to steal jewelry and electronics to pay for her drug habit. Niki goes looking for her mother and tracks her down in a crack den. Holiday follows, and when she arrives, Wanda convinces her that she is ready to come home and give sobriety another shot. She is sad that she has no presents to give her daughter for Christmas, so Holiday lets her take the bike she bought for Niki and present it as her own gift to Niki. Near the film’s end, several neighborhood drug dealers try to steal the bike to pawn for cash, and a fight breaks out. Wanda is run over and killed by an enraged dealer and is laid to rest next to Holiday’s lover, Fisher. At the end, Holiday takes Niki with her on the long-postponed trip to Paris.

This film emerges as better than *To Wong Foo* and *Flawless* (analysis follows) on several fronts. For one, Holiday’s life is not confined to just the nightclub. She is shown
as a fuller human being: as a landlord, church choir director, friend, and parent-figure.

As E. Lynn Harris writes:

_Holiday Heart_ goes to some interesting places. The drag queen in this film is no lady of leisure. I liked seeing Holiday function as a very capable man out in the daylight, seeing how he lives his life between being Sister Holiday in the club and Brother Holiday in the church. Then too I liked seeing a story about a queen who gets up in the morning, hair net and all, with the emphasis on how she feels inside and not on whether her makeup is beat to Kevin Aucoin perfection (53).

Unlike the queens in _To Wong Foo_, who dress in drag 24/7, Holiday is shown in a variety of differing gender expressions, including some that blur traditional male and female categorizations. I also appreciated that Holiday goes on to become Niki’s main caretaker and parent. It is unclear at first whether Holiday or Wanda is killed by the oncoming car. The next scene states that “she was buried right next to Fisher,” and the audience probably believes that it is Holiday who has been killed. Given the figure of the tragic transgender victim, it is entirely refreshing that she not only goes on to live, but to take care of Niki and become an openly queer parent, albeit furthering the caretaker part of the Transgender Mammy stereotype.

Unfortunately, as in the other films, a sexual relationship in Holiday’s life is not shown, reinforcing the notion of the lone/asexual Transgender Mammy. Holiday is shown grieving the death of her partner Fisher, a closeted police officer. In a flashback near the beginning of the film, Holiday is shown in full drag at her deceased partner’s police funeral, a scene that includes her experiencing rejection by some homophobic
officers. E. Lynn Harris writes: “The scene in which Holiday shows up in full drag at Fisher’s police department funeral left me not knowing whether to cringe or cry. Would any drag queen I know go to her lover’s funeral in a dress? Never. We just don’t do that anymore. I’ve been at so many funerals where drag queens, out of respect, have shown up in male attire” (53). From a political perspective, I thought the scene was intriguing and potentially powerful. Holiday was breaking the secrecy and homophobia so often found in the macho profession of the police. When Harris states that drag queens do not wear drag at funerals “out of respect,” I have to question what about drag is so inherently “disrespectful”? At any rate, this bold move does not seem to be in line with her as a character in this film.

During one of the few scenes where Holiday’s identity is directly discussed, Niki asks Holiday questions about being gay. She asks her point blank if she sleeps with men, and then asks her if she feels bad about it. She responds with a question of her own: “Do you feel bad about me sleeping with men?” Niki responds that she is not sure, because her mother and Silas have talked negatively about Holiday’s homosexuality. Holiday responds: “I myself believe that when it comes to matters of the heart the only sin is turning your back on love because of what other people think.” This dignified response is important in terms of helping Niki to come to a place of acceptance, openness and love when confronting Holiday’s sexual and gender identities. However, when Niki asks if she and the middle-aged Holiday are going to march in a gay pride parade, Holiday states: “Oh no baby. I’m from the old school. I marched with King. I ain’t about to march with the queens. I leave all that carrying on to the young folks… In my day we believed in privacy. In your day, it’s about letting it all hang out.” And yet, Holiday is
shown attending her lover’s funeral in full drag, a move that is very in-your-face and “new school.” Despite this contradiction, Holiday’s words to Niki make her more palatable to mainstream audiences, as does her lack of on-screen sexuality.

Although I appreciate aspects of this film, I thought it all too often dissolved into melodrama and came off as a predictable “movie-of-the-week.” While Holiday’s identity is not ignored, it is downplayed in service of Wanda’s drug addiction and parenting to Niki. While Holiday comes off as a very likable character, her own struggles and adversity are given short shrift in the film. We see the aforementioned funeral and a brief flashback of Fisher buying a duplex for the two of them. If the film is genuinely interested in showing Holiday as a sexual being, why must her lover be dead and these scenes be placed in the distant past? We also hear Holiday break down to Wanda when she is distancing herself from Holiday due to Silas’s homophobic influence. She states that as a youth she was put in jail for killing a man who had regularly assaulted her mother. Once in jail, she was “passed around” and subjected to repeated sexual assaults. Although a very significant chapter in her life, the details of this trauma are not explored in any detail. By throwing out such a grave experience in a haphazard manner, the film potentially fuels the myth that LGBT identity springs from past abuse and trauma. Her identity and life stories consistently take a back seat to Wanda’s drug addiction and Niki’s adolescence and yearning for parental love and involvement. In some respects, Holiday plays off as a drag queen “super hero” who swoops in to save the day and clean up the lives of those around her. While I think her actions are admirable in many respects, I am left wishing the film granted her more of her own life and invoked queer/trans identity as not only a personal concern but a socio-political one as well. Like
the classic Mammy stereotype, Holiday is shown as wholly content taking care of somebody else’s child. Given the racism, sexism, heterosexism and transphobia of our culture, Holiday must be a “super-trans” in order to be seen as a sympathetic character. Otherwise, she would have to be a monster or a victim. None of these options allows for the possibility of a truly well-rounded, multidimensional and vibrant character.

With that said, out of the three films discussed in this chapter, I do believe this one holds the most potential for potentially disrupting prejudice. Although certainly not radical or perhaps even progressive, it does cajole viewers to see Holiday as a fuller human being than any of the other depictions of drag queens. While the film certainly has enough similarities to the other movies to place it in the Transgender Mammy category, Ving Rhame’s performance brings a certain vivid texture to the character and her relationships that at least partially camouflages some of the more glaring stereotypes and melodramatic moments. While Holiday’s actions often seem almost angelic or super-heroine-like, the fact that she becomes the primary parent to Niki as an openly queer/trans person is significant. And while the on-screen neutering of Holiday is problematic, her relationships with friends and her newfound family at least help to construct her as a likable, if endearing, on-screen presence.

The final film I will discuss returns with a vengeance to drag/trans identity as an example of transgender mammy-hood, rehabilitation and repeated, comic stereotyping.

**Anything But Flawless**

*Flawless* is a 1999 film written and directed by Joel Schumacher that tells the story of a transgender individual named Rusty (Phillip Seymour Hoffman) and her police officer neighbor Walt “The Wall” Koontz (Robert De Niro). The film opens with Walt
playing a sweaty, macho game of handball with his buddies in New York City. In the
next scene, Walt returns home and begins to yell at his neighbor, Rusty, and her
trans/drag friends. They are singing, rehearsing for an upcoming drag show, and Walt
proceeds to call her and her friends “fuckin’ faggots” and “demented fruitcakes.” In the
next scene, presumably that evening, we see Walt shaving, while in her apartment, Rusty
puts on her make-up in preparation for the show. Walt goes out to a dance club that
features attractive female escorts, while Rusty emcees and performs in a drag show which
features an African American performer in full “Indian” regalia lip syncing to Cher’s
song “Half Breed.”

Trouble arises when one of Rusty’s friends, Amber Garcia Sanchez, fleeing from
the notorious neighborhood criminal kingpin Mr. Z, is chased into the apartment
building. A gunfight ensues, and Walt, reacting to the sounds of gunshots and mayhem,
attempts to come to the rescue, only to suffer a stroke on the staircase. Amber had been
fleeing with money stolen from Mr. Z, which Rusty takes from Amber’s apartment and
hides in her own apartment inside a dressing mannequin. Walt’s stroke leaves him
physically debilitated and in a deep depression, and he is reluctant to ask for help from
anyone. One of the doctors at the hospital, Dr. Nirmala, takes an interest and urges him
to get an in-home physical therapist to help his rehabilitation. When LeShaun arrives to
give Walt physical therapy, he suggests that Walt get singing lessons to help regain his
speech abilities. He tries to get across town to LeShaun’s singing teacher reference, but
because of the physical disabilities from the stroke, cannot handle the long trip. After an
agonizing deliberation, Walt reluctantly goes upstairs to Rusty’s apartment and asks her
to give him the needed singing lessons. The remainder of the film centers on the
relationship between Rusty and Walt as they attempt to overcome mutual loathing for each other in search of a common goal. The restoration of Walt’s voice serves as a centerpiece for an exploration of homophobia/transphobia and an unlikely friendship between two troubled souls. In addition, there is another significant plot layer that continues to center on Mr. Z and his goons searching for their stolen money, and physically accosting various members of the apartment building and community.

As in *To Wong Foo*, the transgender individuals who populate the filmic world of *Flawless* are generally caricatured, flat stereotypes. When they are not ogling the macho Italian guy who makes their pizza, they are engaged in vicious fights over the annual “Flawless” drag contest. They all converse in stereotypical “Drag Speak” where every other word is “girl” and “honey.” Stephen Holden writes that *Flawless* “reinforces every negative stereotype ascribed to gay men in drag. Rusty is hysterical, masochistic, voracious, self-loathing and ragingly ‘on’ every minute of her waking day. Her noisy posse of friends look and act like shallow, preening gargoyles revving up for a never-ending Halloween drag ball. They are about as real as Broadway's ‘Cats.’” The only other members of the GLBT community portrayed in the film are the ultra-conservative Log Cabin Republicans and butch dykes whose sole purpose seems to be to break up the fights between the dueling drag queens. On the other hand, the police officers portrayed are stereotyped as bigoted, narrow-minded goons whose world seems more akin to rural, Middle America than the bustling, cosmopolitan metropolis of New York City.

What is most insulting and disturbing is that Rusty seems to overlook all of Walt’s horrible traits to become friendly with him and use her own musical talents to enrich his life. Their relationship is entirely one-sided. This is another classic example
of the mammy stereotype. The ruling-class benefits from the mammy, but not the other way around. As Holden writes, Rusty teaches Walt “lessons in courage and compassion proffered by an oppressed but indomitable spirit who knows the meaning of suffering and rejection. By the end of the movie, the once rabidly homophobic policeman has clearly melted under Rusty's campy tutelage.” While Walt goes a long way to regain his normal speaking ability thanks to Rusty’s singing lessons and presumably learns the requisite lesson in tolerance, Rusty does not seem to receive much of anything from Walt. Walt’s “gift” to Rusty seems to be his goading her to not wallow in self-pity and just accept herself as a “Drag queen.” While at one point Walt exclaims that he “don’t need no fag with a heart of gold,” he proceeds to use Rusty for his own rehabilitation, and even profit from Rusty’s own lack of self-esteem and self-hatred. In the real world, right-wing bigoted cops and transgender nightclub performers are usually on opposite sides in the culture wars. While it makes for an interesting plot to bring these polar opposites together, the contrived writing and directing of the movie handles it clumsily and repeatedly strains credulity.17

Unlike To Wong Foo, Rusty does have a love interest. However, given the tragic romantic circumstances in Flawless, the asexuality of To Wong Foo is actually preferable.18 Rusty’s paramour Sonny is an Italian Catholic man who is married with two kids and addicted to gambling. He is wracked by guilt and shame about his queer relationship with Rusty and treats her in a horrible manner. There are no scenes of love, tenderness or sweetness between the two; basically all viewers see is Sonny verbally abusing Rusty and asking for his “fucking money.” He comes to Rusty’s apartment on a regular basis to beg and steal money from her so that he can go out and gamble. The film
seems to suggest that Rusty’s atypical gender identity/expression is to blame for her abusive lover. As Walt continues to interrogate Rusty about her identity, it seems almost “natural” within this offensive filmic world that Rusty would be unable to find a person to treat her with dignity and respect. Trans women, the films suggests, are so far down on the social ladder that this is the best they can ever expect to get.

Walt is represented as a “hero” in multiple ways in this film. He is a police officer and he is shown twice trying to intervene to “save the day” when gunshots breakout in the apartment building. His legacy of heroism is shown when his fellow police officer lauds him for intervening years earlier in a hostage situation, for which he received accolades from then-New York City mayor Ed Koch. Obviously, Walt’s partial paralysis is a serious threat to his own (and others’) view of himself as a macho hero. The film presents some of his growing anxiety and vulnerability, as when Walt confesses that he is afraid women will not want to sleep with him anymore because of his physical deterioration. Part of his self-image as a masculine, heterosexual man is thrown into doubt. However, this anxiety is laid to rest towards the end of the film when Walt is shown in post-coital pillow talk with the beautiful Tia (Daphne Rubin-Vega). While initially Walt fears that she has been paid by a fellow police officer to dance with him, he eventually comes around and gives her flowers and they wind up in bed. While the gender-normative man is seen as worthy of tender companionship and sexuality, the gender/sexual “deviant” apparently is not.

Further, Rusty is portrayed as lusting after “straight” men who ultimately will not love her or accept her. This is also reified in the scene with two of Rusty’s queer friends lusting after the presumably straight, pizza-delivery guy. Trans and queer people loving
themselves and each other is simply not exciting enough for this movie. Trans and queer people seem more interested in men who reject them, demean them and despise them. At the local lesbian and gay community center, the trans/drag community fights with the Log Cabin Republicans (all suit-and-tie-wearing white men); at the “Flawless” drag competition the queens fight cattily with each other. The audience is expected to find this sort of competitive in-fighting cute, rather than another example of transphobic framing.

Apparently, writer-director Schumacher’s understanding of trans/drag subjectivity and identity is gleaned from street interactions and dated documentaries. In the article “Simply Flawless” he says: “In a non-preachy way I really wanted to make a movie about what it means to be a man. Ever since I was a teenager, I’ve spent a lot of time in the Village, and if you’ve ever met any of the non-star drag queens on the streets there, you know that to survive they have to be, excuse the expression, real tough guys.”

Schumacher’s view of transgender people is very telling. While most on the male-to-female trans spectrum would object to others identifying them as “real tough guys,” Schumacher is unable to view their toughness as female strength or feminine power. He must re-masculinize them in accordance with their assigned birth sex, which is both an essentialist and sexist maneuver. Further, it is troubling that observations made on a street corner by a person outside of the community come to inform a movie script.

In the same article, there is a discussion of the genesis of the script:

Actually, Schumacher didn't begin the project envisioning a transsexual at all. The drama was originally inspired by a friend of his who'd suffered several strokes but regained his speech with the help of a music teacher who impressed Schumacher as "a strong and patient woman.” I realized,
after meeting her, that music is such a great vehicle, there might be an interesting movie there." He immediately sketched out the stroke victim: "I knew Walt had to be a tough guy who'd shut down emotionally."

Figuring out the second half of the equation took longer. Schumacher experimented with several other combinations—a May-December male-female couple; a white-black teaming; a male-male tango—before a viewing of Lee Grant's 1985 documentary What Sex Am I? opened his imagination to a straight guy—male-to-female transsexual combo.

(Kilday)

Schumacher seems to go down the line of disparate identity configurations and dyads before settling on the “Archie Bunker” bigot and self-hating drag queen/gay man/transsexual. As the reviewer David Noh correctly points out, Flawless seems like it emerges from a different time-period, almost pre-Stonewall: Shameless would be a more apt title for Flawless. Trash-with-flash director Joel Schumacher sets gay screen images back about three decades with this noisy inanity. He fills his film with homosexuals who are, without exception, mincing, bitchy cartoons who fully live up to the old cliché of “a woman trapped in a man's body.” Rusty's basic m.o. is saving up enough money to get a sex change, a gambit that seemed rather archaic even as far back as Dog Day Afternoon (1975). It's an infinitely depressing view of homosexuality, wherein gay men are universally lonely, lost and besotted by unfeeling, nominally hetero, hustler types.
Although Schumacher seems clear that the character is a male-to-female transsexual, no such clarity ever emerges in the text of the film itself. This confusion seems spurred by the character of Walt, who basically sees Rusty as an “ugly fat fag” or, slightly more generously, as a “drag queen.” Rusty’s own self-perception is clearly as a male-to-female transsexual. The reasons she took the criminal money from her murdered friend was to finance her sex reassignment surgery, à la Dog Day Afternoon. She tells Walt she is saving money for the operation, and that this will save her relationship with Sonny. Once again, another flagrant and inaccurate stereotype is presented: that trans people have surgery because of their investment in a sexual relationship. In addition, when Rusty describes her identity, she calls herself a “woman trapped in a man’s body.” This reductionist and clichéd narrative of transsexual identity removes all doubt as to the film’s lack of knowledge of transgender people’s lives, subjectivities and aspirations. Then the film makes a mockery of Rusty’s aspiration to have surgery, with Walt talking about Rusty cutting off her “dick and balls” and Walt telling her that she is “nobody’s idea of a woman.” Despite these cruel insults, Rusty throws Walt a “graduation party” for his progress in regaining his normal speech.

For her part, Rusty throws back many verbal jabs to Walt and calls him a “Nazi” and a “fascist.” The film seems to suggest that they are equally “bigoted” and stubborn people who each need each other to survive. Such a romanticized idea does not square with the reality of societal power differentials. Rusty and her friends are transgender people, some of color, most of limited economic means, in a transphobic, racist and classist world. Walt is a white, gender-normative, heterosexual police officer in New York City, the very emblem of privilege and power, complete with a gun and a license to
use it. While it is true that he is neither wealthy nor traditionally able-bodied as a result of his stroke, these challenges pale in comparison to those faced by Rusty and her friends. In fact, the only trouble stirred up by Walt’s economic status and his disabilities appear to be blocked access to his usual straight, masculine privileges. When Walt calls up his sometime lover Karen (Wanda De Jesus), he asks her to come over so they can have sex. Karen implores him to give her money for her rent, which he has done in the past. Now that Walt lives on a limited disability payment from the NYPD, he is unable to pay Karen for sex. Without an economic incentive, Karen rejects his request. As noted earlier, Walt’s biggest concern about his current condition is that women will not want to sleep with him anymore. Despite the real constraints posed by limited economic means and being disabled, the film short-circuits these concerns to focus on Walt’s privileged relationship to normative gender and sexuality. Reviewer Emanuel Levy nicely encapsulates the film’s failing by writing: “However, as morality tales go, Flawless exhibits the same old-fashioned message as To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar! namely, that sensitive transvestites have the capacity to humanize and heal the most bigoted straights. That's hardly enough for a picture that's meant to be au courant.”

At the film’s end, the building manager is under pressure to determine which of his residents possesses the stolen money sought by Mr. Z and his goons. He opens one of Rusty’s letters to discover she has paid a deposit for sex reassignment surgery. He tips Mr. Z off and they ransack Rusty’s apartment. Despite a vicious verbal argument, Walt rushes to the rescue and plays the hero once again, even suffering a gunshot wound to the shoulder. Rusty accompanies him to the hospital, paying for the medical care with her money saved for surgery. Walt states: “Lucky you didn’t cut your balls off yet.” Rusty’s
bravery in confronting the criminals is falsely attributed to her “balls” rather than to her strength of convictions as a woman in a transphobic world. Rusty becomes one of Schumacher’s “real tough guys” who earns her bravery along side the more traditionally-gendered macho cop-hero.

**Is Flawless a Critique of Masculinity?**

James R. Keller agrees with my basic premise that many of these films that feature transgender subjects portray them as rehabilitators. Citing *To Wong Foo; The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert,* and *The Birdcage,* he writes: “The capacity of transvestites\(^{20}\) [sic] to revolutionize their environment and to rehabilitate those around them is well documented in popular cinema” (146). However, far from seeing this trend as regressive and deeply problematic, he praises it for its supposed progressive political potential. In “Rehabilitating the Camera: Loquacious Queens and Male Autism in *Flawless,*” Keller has a decidedly positive take on the film. Keller uses the notion of “male autism” as developed by Roger Horrocks to make his case. Male autism is defined as the state of hyper-masculine maleness where emotions are not displayed and positive connections are not made. Keller believes that the “male autism” displayed by Walt is deconstructed in the film, and that Walt’s traditional masculinity is compared and contrasted to Rusty’s atypical masculinity. “*Flawless* features a drag queen and a hyper-masculine male, and, forcing them into close proximity and into an uneasy alliance, the film dramatizes the hostility between antithetical masculinities, revealing the vicissitudes of their acquaintance and literalizing the metaphor of the ‘autistic’ male” (139). Like Schumacher, Rusty’s gender expression is seen by Keller as a variation on masculinity, not as a form of femininity. While Rusty clearly sees herself as a woman, the film seems
to not take her at her word. Through identification with Walt, viewers may agree that Rusty is “nobody’s idea of a woman.” There is still a dominant cultural notion that transgender people are merely delusional and have not been able to accept their placement in their “true” (biologically designated) gender. This sentiment is reinforced in all of these films by the way that transgender/transsexual, drag and gay identity are continuously subsumed into one another, conflated and cast as basically synonymous.

Keller argues “it is drag queens that the public love (even as they simultaneously disapprove), and thus drag queens are the vehicle for representation and inclusion in popular culture” (151). Well, of course the “public,” i.e. the heterosexual, mainstream audience, “love” the “drag queens” as they are presented in these films because they are selfless, asexual, angelic, best pals, non-threatening, witty, spicy and above all, subservient and servile mammies to the dominant gender/sexual order and those who enforce it. Gender-normative, cissexual people can suckle at the figurative breast of the Transgender Mammy to be reassured of their position of hegemony in U.S. culture and society. To me, this does not represent progress; it represents the establishment of a cultural code that simply caters to the reification of normatively-gendered, heterosexual people. The empowerment of the trans characters is always circuited through the dominant class of “normal” people. Vida, Noxeema and Chi Chi earn their fairy wings through assisting the straight denizens of Snydersville. Holiday’s life gains renewed meaning through trying to save Wanda and Niki. Rusty learns to accept herself by working with the bigoted Walt. It sends the message that these transgender people are not good enough, just as they are; they must gain redemption through selfless dedication to other people, often to those with more privilege and cultural capital than they
themselves possess. While there are enormous payoffs to the “normative” characters in these films, the transgender subjects receive little material benefit for their actions, save the knowledge of their sentimental good deeds.

In summing up his article, Keller writes:

As Walt learns to speak again, he simultaneously learns respect for others, both women and gays. *Flawless* is thus an exemplum, progressively luring its audience into an acceptance of the humanity of gay men by offering a paradigm for the sympathetic transformation of the most close-minded and intransigent male bigot. The example literalizes the metaphor of “male autism,” demonstrating how the emotionally unavailable and hyper-masculine male is redeemed. The juxtaposition of antithetical masculinities is not intended to prioritize one over the other, but to urge an effective compromise that borrows the virtues of each gender performance to create males better equipped to cope with the vicissitudes of their lives. The rehabilitation of Walt is also metaphorical for the increased acceptance of gay men and women in Hollywood cinema, as the camera’s perspective broadens, evolving from a myopic identification with Walt’s point-of-view to an enthusiastic embrace of the socially and sexually marginalized. (152)

As stated earlier, Walt’s final comment en route to the hospital is: “good thing you didn’t cut off your balls yet.” I do not think this shows sensitivity to women or gays, and certainly not to trans women. The redeemed bigot here is hardly redeemed at all, and it is Rusty who makes yet another sacrifice to Walt by shelling out her much-needed
money for surgery to pay for his emergency medical care. Keller’s use of the word “masculinities” to describe Rusty’s gender expression is off the mark if we take her trans-identification seriously, as is the use of the term “gay man.”21 While the graduation party can be read as an “embrace” of the “socially and sexually marginalized,” it seems more like a maudlin fantasy sequence than anything steeped in the reality of these vastly disparate worlds colliding.

It is exceedingly difficult to extrapolate much from this film that is remotely subversive, progressive or forward-thinking. Keller writes: “As Walt learns to speak again, he simultaneously learns respect for others, both women and gays. Flawless is thus an exemplum, progressively luring its audience into an acceptance of the humanity of gay men by offering a paradigm for the sympathetic transformation of the most close-minded and intransigent male bigot” (152). While I would argue that Walt’s “transformation” is dubious, let’s take Keller at his word. While the audience may indeed see Walt’s bigotry lessened, simultaneously they are seeing some of the worst stereotypes of gay men, drag queens and transgender women in cinematic history. Further, what about the “transformation” of Rusty’s character? Rusty’s character, as a Transgender Mammy, is in service to Walt, not to herself. While those viewers who identify with Walt may vicariously also question their own homophobia/transphobia, I would argue that, in this cinematic instance, the price of the ticket is not worth it. Too many demeaning stereotypes about trans women are reinforced for it to be a worthwhile trade-off. And the challenging aspects of transgenderism, the threat to the dominant gender order, are lost in a sea of sequins, feathers and faux camp speech and over-exaggerated gesticulations.
What We Learn from the Transgender Mammy

Transgender people are represented in these films as servile, as sidekicks, as best gal pals, as clowns and as walking stereotypes, in short, as mammys. The Transgender Mammy is marked by asexuality or sexual dysfunction; selfless devotion to others to the point of self-abnegation; innocuous sassiness, witiness and stereotyped language usage; seeing problems as personal, apolitical and based on bad choices/attitudes rather than having been caused by societal oppression; poor treatment of other queer/trans people and intra-community competitiveness; rehabilitation of others through fabulousness, servility and dedication to the maintenance of the dominant social order. While the films generally have a liberal message of tolerance at their core, this simply functions to mask the serious lack of thoughtful analyses of hegemonic power structures in the U.S. One might wonder if there is power in being a rehabilitator. After all, aren’t the straight and gender-normative people in the films relying on the savoir-faire of the “othered” characters, thereby illuminating their positive strengths and contributions? As mentioned earlier, it is important that trans people are positioned as advice-givers and as making worthwhile contributions. Compared to the representation of trans women in the slasher film, at least the Transgender Mammy is not cast as frightening or demonic. However, the point is not to invalidate the “good deeds” done by transgender people, but to problematize the unidirectional nature of their beneficial character. Who profits and whose lives remain largely unchanged? Micro-level interactions can and do produce cultural change, but they are never an adequate replacement for social movements. While *Holiday Heart* scoffs at “marching with the queens,” *Flawless* presents a cynical portrait of activism in the image of the Log Cabin Republicans. *To Wong Foo’s*
“Attitude is Everything” ideology supplants militant political activism with new-age mumbo-jumbo. While I may be overreaching in my desire for a progressive vision of social change, the films’ apolitical or politically cynical views leaves viewers with the skewed notion that it is transgender people, and the not the society in which they live, that needs to change.

The trans characters in these films exist as spiritualist mammies for the rehabilitation of the dysfunctional but gender-normative and straight people which surround them. However, their own needs and very subjectivities are completely lost in the process. It may be empowering for the conservative and narrow-minded to receive a splash of color and excitement from the “deviants” in their midst and to be helped out in their personal lives, but where does this leave the trans characters themselves? These films are basically about gender slumming, normative, and in some cases, ultra-conservative, people who go through a life-change precipitated by the spicy drag queens who come to their rescue.

Servility, the process of both serving other people and serving dominant interests, is a central theme in these films. Heterosexual and gender-normative people get to realize the sad circumstances of their lives because an inferior gender-deviant is pointing out the error of their ways. In return, the deviant receives the pleasure of knowing that they have helped the dominant class to become a better person. What is lost, of course, is that the subjectivity of the “deviant” remains basically unchanged.

The ludicrousness of this is realized best of all in Flawless. Rusty is repeatedly called a faggot, a fruit, ugly, fat and any number of other abusive epithets. Yet, it is she
who helps Walt regain his voice and his ability to communicate. Why she feels any level of dedication to such a man is explainable only by her own level of self-hate and loathing. Others, however, do not see it that way. Mubarak Dahir writes:

And the film is not simply a platform for righteous gayspeak to triumph over bigotry and transform the homophobes. The movie shows us the two characters through each other’s eyes, giving us views that may be unflattering, but are unflinching. For example: Is Rusty, who is saving up for a sex-change operation, really a man trapped in a woman's body - or just a lonely, unhappy drag queen who has deluded himself into believing that if only he were a woman, he could win the affection of the rough-neck straight types he now pays to have sex with? It's a curious question that the film refuses to answer in the end. But the movie cleverly uses the homophobe to ask it, because, God knows, our politically correct sensibilities would never let a self-respecting drag queen ask it herself.

What the film does present is a self-hating transgender person who is unclear about her identity. Dahir’s assertion that Rusty desires sex reassignment surgery to win the affection of “rough-neck straight types” is a common falsehood perpetuated by critics, particularly those in the lesbian/gay community. This misperception assumes that trans people desire surgery or gender transition in order to become heterosexual in their new gender role and to be able to sleep with masculine, straight men. Thus, they are seen as homophobic gay males who cannot accept their “true” sexual orientation and switch in order to become normative, straight women. The lines and permutations of sex, gender and sexual orientation are blurred, dynamic and infinitely complex. Rusty’s struggle to
discover if she is a drag queen, a trans woman or gay man are struggles that many people have undertaken in a quest to understand their own humanity and their place in the social order. However, the filmic representation simply reinforces the notion that transsexuals are deluded and self-hating gays who save money for surgery in an attempt to appease their sexual partners. The notion that Rusty could be a lesbian, or could partner with one of her transgender girlfriends, or with an FTM, is not even possible to explore in this film. Gay = drag queen = transsexual is an equation which is too tightly intertwined and conflated to allow for such a complex understanding of the intricacies and separations between gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation. In fact, a gay male version of the Transgender Mammy exists in the television hit Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, a program that contains many of the same problems as the films examined here, only with a gay male mammy in place of the transgender one.  

It is possible that To Wong Foo director Beeban Kidron believes that her film may help open up the minds of people who hold stereotyped notions of the gay/trans community. If this is indeed true, it comes at a price. One of the reasons I chose to focus on To Wong Foo is all the (gay and straight) people over the years who have told me how much they “just love it,” and then evince considerable bewilderment when I enumerate the reasons why I do not share their enthusiasm. Many traditionally-gendered people are attracted to these characters for similar reasons that white people are attached to iconographic images of Native Americans that are used as mascots in college and professional team sports. Whites, like gender conformists, are able to flex their cultural muscles by exercising their authority over the images of the racialized and gendered “other.” By reifying their projected fantasies onto these groups and calling it a tribute,
people in dominant groups are able to deflect attention away from the often brutal living conditions that continue to beset Native Americans and transgender people. The brilliant documentary film *In Whose Honor?* produced by Jay Rosenstein captures the longing that many white people have for racialized imagery that is blatantly offensive to the group it supposedly “honors.” Focusing on the University of Illinois, the film follows Charlene Teters valiant fight to stop the use of mascots featuring Chief Illiniwek. She starts a movement to stop the use of the mascot and encounters tremendous opposition from students, administration and alumni of the University of Illinois. The film features many interviewees who claim that the Chief is “honoring” Native Americans and who hold tremendous emotional attachment to images of the mascot. Teters, along with many other Native people and their allies are exposing how offensive, painful and destructive the mascots are to them, yet the University and non-Native people choose to cling to their romanticized notions in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary. Why is that?

I believe that those at the top of the social ladder have the privilege to set the tone of the discourse and they do not want to let go of this power. Whether they admit it or not, those clinging to caricatured images of “Native Americans” in sports mascot imagery are cementing their own position of dominance and furthering the ideological circulation of white-supremacy. The cissexual people who “just love” media texts like *To Wong Foo* are attracted to non-threatening images of gender-variant people that affirm, rather than deconstruct, hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality. Going beyond non-threatening, the trans people in these films are downright helpful, fixing problems and lending a fabulous touch to colorize an otherwise black-and-white world. Subject positions are hardly challenged through these depictions; they are upheld and reinvigorated. Like the
figure of the “noble savage” in mascot imagery, the Transgender Mammy comforts, placates and reassures the dominant viewer and lulls them into agreement with distorted and insidious cultural ideologies.

Writing about the effects of mascots, King and Springwood write: “Mascots are not trivial signs or flat performances. Instead, representation is an active practice in which individuals both encode and decode meanings. As a consequence, it has material effects. It is a productive nexus. It shapes the manner in which individuals understand and interact with themselves and others” (331). The “productive nexus” created by the films examined in this chapter is troubling for the ways in which it frames transgender people in such limited and limiting ways. It robs gender nonconforming people of their multidimensionality and reduces them to flat caricatures. Further, it potentially structures interactions between cis- and transgender, queer and straight communities that reproduces hegemonic power relations. Cisgender people create and recreate their own identities and subjectivities through (dis)association with the exoticized “other.” This can include consuming media texts or images. As King and Springwood write: Euro-Americans create themselves “through renditions of otherness and cultural difference. Native American mascots thus open privileged spaces in which individuals and institutions re-create the white subject” (16). In a similar manner, the Transgender Mammy facilitates the consolidation of the cissexual subject (through opposition to the abjected but romanticized gender-deviant other) and the perpetuation of ideologies of gender-normative and heterosexual supremacy. Thus, the “imagined tranny” is not a “trivial sign” but a pivotal “productive nexus” that potentially recreates constrained social
relations and narrow subjectivities as well as produces master texts and cultural codes that index trans people in stultifying ways.

White viewers of Black Mammy images were able to ignore the racial terrorism in America and sit back and watch women of color who doted on them and upheld their privilege. As Kirk sums up, films with trans themes such as To Wong Foo that target mainstream audiences result in an “ambiguous product that ultimately does more harm than good by shaving off the sharp edges of any real social commentary” (178). It is only through a continued interrogation of dominant visions of reality that we will ever see the emergence of complex and multifaceted representations of genuine subjects that are neither angelic nor demonic. While “Indian” mascots do nothing to inform society about Native American issues, they do illuminate white constructs and projections of “Indianness.” In a similar vein, these films (To Wong Foo and Flawless) serve, if nothing else, as a record of heterosexual projections, sexual anxieties and fantastical expectations. I will leave it to current and future filmmakers to debunk the myth of the transgender person as angelic rehabilitator-mammy and replace her with multifaceted, complex and overtly political depictions that do more to challenge the status quo than preserve it.
CHAPTER THREE ENDNOTES

1 However, it is important to note that this castrating imagery is always of Black women over Black men. Black women generally do not have the social, cultural, economic or political power to wield dominance over white men due to the social institutions of racism and white-supremacy in U.S. society.

2 I do not mean to connote here that drag queens and transgender women are synonymous. However, in these films, there is not a clear demarcation between the two identity categories. The writers and producers of these films seem to lack a good knowledge of the variations within the trans community and stick to a hyper-feminine drag queen image to represent the diversity of trans-feminine subjectivities.

3 Later in the text, Bogle goes on to describe the career of Louise Beavers in some depth, citing her as one of the prime examples of the mammy-Aunt Jemima in film. Bogle writes that Beavers was the “perfect foil and background flavor for such depression heroines as Jean Harlowe, Mae West, and Claudette Colbert—women forced by the times to be on their own, yet needing someone in their corner to cheer them up when things looked too rough, to advise them when personal problems overwhelmed them (62). Although Beavers was naturally a larger-size woman, Bogle writes that studios frequently put her on force-feed diets to make her weight even heavier. She was frequently cast as a cook, maid or servant. “She was always happy, always kind, always intricately involved in the private lives of her employers, so much so that she usually completely lacked a private life of her own” (63). Other mammies on screen were played by actresses such as Ethel Waters and Hattie McDaniel. One of the prime mammy representations was the radio, and later, situation-comedy television show, entitled Beulah. The show featured a black maid who helped to solve the dilemmas of a white family.

4 As examples of films which contain the “magical nigger” stereotype, Lee cites the following films: What Dreams May Come (1998), The Green Mile (1999), The Family Man (2000) and The Legend of Bagger Vance (2000). Lee defines the phenomenon as “Magical Negroes who appear out of nowhere and have these great powers but who can’t use them to help themselves or their own people but only for the benefit of the white stars of the movies.” From p. 205 of Spike Lee Interviews, Edited by Cynthia Fuchs.

5 In the trans/drag communities, one might envision a similar Aunt Jemima/Ida B. Wells comparison between RuPaul and Sylvia Rivera. Many Americans are comfortable with the straight-friendly, well-coiffed media personality because she is an entertainer and politically-neutral or perhaps even conservative. (She has defended Chuck Knipp, a white male who dresses in blackface drag, as well as the use of the term “tranny” even though many find it to be an offensive epithet.) Meanwhile, many Americans have never heard of Sylvia Rivera (see note 10), a radical activist who fought at Stonewall, on behalf of poor and homeless people, people of color, the LGBT community, and many other progressive causes.

6 It is my assertion that the Black Mammy is not an authentic African American cultural artifact but a white-created racialized image rooted in oppression. The Transgender Mammy described here, more than resembling or not the Black Mammy, resembles the creation, projection, maintenance and popularity of a hegemonically-constructed iconic image. The two distinct types of Mammies may be said to be produced, framed and perpetuated by those in positions of power in somewhat similar ways. The joy and satisfaction created by the Mammy may have a similar effect in the heart and mind of members of the dominant groups.

7 In the skit, Leguizamo transforms from a Latino man to a Japanese man. Thus, while it is true that Leguizamo does not pass for white, the racial grouping given the most power in the U.S., nonetheless going from Latino to Japanese is represented as a step up because of the way money and power are often associated with Japanese identity and culture.


10 Sylvia Rivera was a Stonewall Combatant and long-term activist. She was a Latina transgender woman who fought in many social movements, including struggles against racism, heterosexism, transphobia, poverty and police harassment. She had a difficult life being a runaway youth, with periods of homelessness and of drug addiction. For more information on Rivera, please see: “Queens in Exile: The Forgotten Ones” by Sylvia Rivera on page 67 of Genderqueer: Voices from Beyond the Sexual Binary, edited by Joan Nestle, Riki Wilchins and Clare Howell. Also, see: “Sylvia Rivera: Fighting in Her Heels:
Marsha P. Johnson was an African American, transgender, queer person who was a friend of and fellow activist with Sylvia Rivera. In the 1970s, together with Rivera, she co-founded STAR: Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries to help queer and trans street youth have food and shelter. Her initial “P” stood for Pay It No Mind. Johnson was found floating in the Hudson River in 1992 after the annual Pride Parade. Police ruled the death a suicide, but friends of Johnson believe it was a hate crime murder. For an interview with Johnson, see: “Rapping with a Street Transvestite Revolutionary: An Interview with Marcia [sic] Johnson” contained in Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation, edited by Karla Jay and Allen Young. P. 112-120.

The “Transgender Monster” is explored in-depth in this dissertation in chapter four. Like the Madonna/Whore binary that stereotypes women and female sexuality in particular, the monster/angel binary of trans imagery is another limiting binaristic system of signification that appeals to ignorant spectators who wish to shoe-horn complex transgender lives into simplistic, pedantic narratives.

Another example of this is putting women on a “pedestal.” While some may view this as subjecting women to chivalrous treatment, feminists have long criticized it as sexist. Putting women on a pedestal means they are not being treated as equals and are cast as extremely “different” from men. Egalitarian bonds between men and women require peer relationships that interrogate hierarchical roles rather than legitimize them.

12 It is interesting to note that in many respects these characters are the equivalent of the character Sam (Dooley Wilson) in Michael Curtiz’s classic film Casablanca (1942). Sam is the African American piano player who is repeatedly asked to play “As Time Goes By” for the sake of the separated white heterosexual couple Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) and Ilsa Laszlo (Ingrid Bergman). Sam, the sole black character in the film, is the loyal helpmate who exists to placate the white characters in the film, and, by extension, white viewers. While I do not mean to draw simplistic parallels between the two films, the connections are interesting to contemplate. The drag queens in this film represent the many psychological projections of straight society. Hegemonic producers of cultural artifacts have always needed groups to embody particular fantasies and projections of dominant viewers. In To Wong Foo, the fantasy is of a spiritual, angelic helpmate who is self-abnegating, non-confrontational (i.e. mammy-like) and able to entertain on command. Like the beleaguered Sam in Casablanca, the queens of To Wong Foo are asked to play the same song over and over, and the sheet music is clearly written by the powers-that-be. The score to which they sashay along is written by others, for the titillation and enjoyment of others, and ultimately for the political gain of others.

In an earlier draft of this chapter, I had also included a discussion of the film Woman on Top. I cut that section because the chapter became too long and because the transgender character was the most minor of the four films. Woman on Top (2000) is Directed by Fina Torres and written by Vera Blasi, and stars Penelope Cruz as Isabella, a chef from Bahia, Brazil who is madly in love with her husband Toninho. Her best gal-pal is Monica, a black transgender woman. Although a minor role, the film contains another excellent example of the Transgender Mammy stereotype, with Monica present to prop up Isabella’s exciting heterosexual life and add a splash of color to her televised cooking program. The film utilizes “magical realism” to tell its tale, following the fairy-tale magic suggested in To Wong Foo. In addition, its images are an example of “tropicalization” for the way it presents a stereotyped and racialized view of Latin America, a theory that follows Said’s notion of “Orientalist” constructions of Asia. For more on Tropicalization, see: Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad edited by Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman.

Pronoun usage is difficult to negotiate here. Holiday is truly represented in this film as a bi-gender and even gender-fluid person. Her gender identity and gender expression defy easy categorization. While I am unsatisfied using “she” alone to describe her, I do so for consistency with the other films’ characters and to honor her drag queen/female persona. All too often, transgender women are called by the pronoun which corresponds with their biological sex—“he” and “his.” Calling them by the female pronouns helps to honor their feminine identity and counter the biologically essentialist trend of labeling people based on their genitalia.

My point here is not that a more credulous plot line is necessarily more progressive. However, this film does position itself in a “realist” vein, and yet the writer/director has a very dated and unrealistic view of...
gender and sexual diversity. In some respects, I would say this film is even more problematic than To Wong Foo, since it is possible to see To Wong Foo as a fairy tale, which then necessarily has a different relationship to “reality.” Given Flawless’s implied realism, the writer/director has a responsibility to do their homework and present transgender characters that are vibrant and multidimensional rather than cardboard stereotypes. Otherwise, the quality of the film production suffers, and the image of an already oppressed minority group is tarnished yet again.

18 This is why it is important to note that the sexuality of the Transgender Mammy is either invisibilized (i.e. rendered asexual) or presented as dysfunctional. Why does the coupling of Monica and Cliff in Woman on Top come out of nowhere and only at the end of the film? Why is the relationship between Holiday and Fisher a flashback and not presented in the present? Why does Chi Chi have to disavow her love for Bobby Lee and give him to the cisgender female character? With Rusty, her “lover” is both married to another woman and stealing cash from her for a gambling addiction. In all of these portrayals, none of the trans people have a warm and loving relationship during the main narratives of the film. The films seem terrified of presenting intimacy and sexuality that involves a transgender/queer character. One of the prime ways of denying somebody their full humanity, to render them as an object, is to remove, distort or degrade their complex sexuality.

19 This same problem happens in the documentary film Murderball. While the film is interesting and groundbreaking for the way it represents disabled men who play rugby in their wheelchairs, the way the men talk about women and sex is troubling because it reinforces status quo norms of patriarchy.

20 Keller’s lack of knowledge of the community is demonstrated by his use of the term “transvestite.” This is a term that it deeply disliked within the U.S. trans community for its datedness and fetishistic/psychiatric connotations. In recent years, it has become an epithet of choice for some bigots (“Oh my god, look at that transvestite!”) It has been replaced by the more neutral term “cross-dresser.” Cross-dresser generally refers to a heterosexual-identified male who wears clothing associated with women on a part-time basis. Given its referencing of a particular subgroup under the trans umbrella, it is not appropriate to use it as an all-inclusive term.

21 Keller’s examination is homocentric, or what might be termed a gay imperialist approach. Transgender issues, lives and theories are frequently consumed under a gay/lesbian analytical lens that privileges homosexuality while marginalizing gender variance, particularly transsexuality.

22 I believe Rusty to be self-hating for the following reasons: she is sexually involved with a man who beats her and steals her money; she gives singing lessons to a man who verbally berates her and disparages her identity on numerous occasions; she spends money on Walt’s medical care rather than on her own surgery; she allows others to dictate the terms of her identity (just a “drag queen”) rather than follow through on her resolve to live her life as a woman.

23 Queer Eye for the Straight Guy aired on BRAVO from 2003-2007. Just as the show perpetuates the feeding frenzy of late consumer capitalism, it also reinscribes gender and sexual norms. Although queer men are being represented, and there is some diversity in terms of their gender expressions, their images square with dominant cultural expectations because these men are serving, literally and figuratively, the masculine, straight, male subject. As in the films examined above, where drag queens exist to fix straight people’s problems and entertain traditionally-gendered folks, in Queer Eye, gay male subjects can flounce around for the benefit of the straight viewing audience and the heterosexual male cast mate because they are situated in a subordinate manner and framed in ways which resonate with heterosexism and patriarchy. Richard Goldstein notes that gay men have always been assigned the role of “body servants” or side-kicks and that they are expected to have a doting eye for the straight guy and be obsessed with style, playing the role of “faux women.” Further, with the emergence of the so-called “metrosexual,” straight men can toy with the feminine, exercise their mastery over queerness, and still have a safe label/sanctuary to reconsolidate their own position of masculinity and heterosexuality within male-supremacist patriarchy. “Metrosexual” broadens the category of heterosexual masculinity to include things previously forbidden, but it does so through a reliance both on oppressive and excessive consumer capitalism and through patriarchy. No one filmic or televisial text can be blamed for single handedly upholding dominant ideologies that further oppression. Queer Eye, like other popular cultural texts, can be read in a variety of contradictory ways, and viewers will make and construct a variety of meanings from the spectacle of the show. However, those who wish to valorize popular culture often idealistically ascribe “subversive” things to texts that to me, seem hopelessly naïve and problematic. In a deeply troubling and assimilationist article entitled “Queer Eye: In Praise of Gay-Straight Bonding” Jennifer Vanasco writes: “Because straight men
aren't afraid of gay men who look and act like them — they think of those kinds of gay men as exceptions. They're afraid of the gay men who are gaily gay, the kind who strut their stuff in Pride Parades, who haunt dark bars and public bathrooms, and who swish around on TV. So Bravo is doing us all a public service. Because by giving us weekly examples of the differences between gay men and straight men — and by making gay men seem not only unthreatening but downright helpful — Bravo is showing America that we really all can get along.” As Kidron does in To Wong Foo, Vanasco utilizes the rhetoric of liberal pluralism and the trope of helpfulness to stress the similarities of gay and straight people. Of course, this sentiment comes at a price, primarily the demonization of those “others” who detract from gay-straight similarity. How are the “abjected” elements that Vanasco hails (trans and gender-variant people, sex radicals, activists etc.) oppositionally framed so as to facilitate the celebration of those elements deemed “unthreatening” and “downright helpful”? Like To Wong Foo before it, Queer Eye allows straight society to pat itself on the back for its perceived liberalism, while at the same time containing queerness and gender transgression in ways that perpetuate the maintenance of heterosexist privilege and patriarchal power. It is no accident that Queer Eye often features sub-plots that focus on improving the straight man’s relationship with his female partner and that encourage the stability of the traditional, heterosexual trajectory of courtship, engagement and marriage. As gay marriage heats up as a political issue in the ever-widening culture wars, Queer Eye producers trot out five gay men to facilitate the reconsolidation of marriage as an institution between “one man and one woman.” Just as To Wong Foo features docile, defanged drag queens who unwittingly participate in the preservation of the very systems which oppress them, Queer Eye similarly heaps up servings of gay men as the arbiters of good taste in order to cast them as useful and legitimate to dominant, heterosexual America.
CHAPTER FOUR:

TRANSGENDER MONSTERS: SLASHER FILMS AND THE PERPETUATION OF
THE “SHE-MALE PSYCHO” MYTH

“The monster always represents the disruption of categories, the destruction of
boundaries, and the presence of impurities and so we need monsters and we need to
recognize and celebrate our own monstrosities.” – Judith Halberstam

Introduction

Thus far, we have examined Transgender Deceivers and Transgender Mammies.
While both archetypes have many faults, they are indeed less insidious than the topic of
this chapter: The Transgender Monster. In the 2007 remake of Halloween, directed by
Rob Zombie, we learn the roots of killer Jason Meyer’s psychosis. Raised in an abusive,
dysfunctional family, his stepfather frequently calls him “queer” and states that when
Michael grows up he will “cut off his dick and balls” and then rename himself
“Michelle.” As a child, Michael is presented with long hair and baby fat, two gender
cues to representationally “feminize” him.2 Halloween is only the most recent example of
a long line of films that have presented gender-variance in proximity to psychotic and
homicidal behaviors.

Several years ago, I attended a transgender conference in the Northeast at which
approximately 400 transgender people were in attendance. After one of the event’s gala
dinners, approximately five or six of us in the male-to-female spectrum of trans people
entered the elevator to return to our rooms. When the elevator stopped at the next floor, a
presumably straight and very gender-normative cisgender man scanned all of us,
biological males dressed in dresses, high heels, make-up and wigs, and visibly grimaced.
He decided not to get on the elevator and stood there as the elevator door slammed shut. Inside, we laughed heartily at the man’s ignorance. But internally, I could not laugh it off quite so easily. My mind immediately went to a scene from Brian de Palma’s 1980 film *Dressed to Kill*. In this scene, Michael Caine plays a transsexual dressed in a long black leather coat who rushes onto an elevator and viciously kills a woman by slashing her with a straight razor. In typical de Palmian fashion, the scene is extremely graphic, violent and chilling. I certainly do not pretend to know what was in the mind of that fearful man who gave us dirty looks and refused to share airspace with us in that elevator, but internally I wondered: how do cultural codes that present gender-transgressive people as insane psychopaths, deviant killers and monstrous, murdering machines function in the culture at large? When I returned to my room, I looked in the mirror and carefully examined my reflection. What did other people see when they looked at me? Why did other people not see what I saw? As I had many times in the past, I began to reflect, remembering several other times when people would not get on the same elevator with me, or when they moved away from me, or when they gasped or jumped when I entered a room or opened a door right in front of them. I also began to think about the experiences of other minorities, such as African American men, who have frequently reported being treated with fear and anxiety in public spaces, particularly by white women (i.e. women clutching their purse, averting their eyes or crossing the street to avoid contact of any kind.) Certain bodies seem to routinely provoke fear in public spaces. While I think this is an incredibly complex situation, I know that such fear does not spring forth spontaneously; rather, it is embedded in people’s psyches through repeated cultural conditioning. As we shall see in this chapter, the mass media has done a
lot to damage the image of the gender-variant person, particularly the male-to-female cross-dresser, transgender and transsexual woman. This chapter attempts to trace this peculiar and disturbing trend, as well as provide an in-depth examination of three particular examples from the archives of mainstream cinema.

**It’s About Hybridity: Monsters in Popular Culture**

The monster as it is imagined in popular culture is always already marked by the mixture of hybridity and liminality. The early conception of the monster was often characterized as having a mixture of human and animal components. Examples include the Wolfman, Medusa, Frankenstein, Cat People, etc. As Halberstam points out, these earlier monsters, from the Gothic period and onward before the advent of the post/modern period, were more concerned with boundary violations involving race and species. Referring to the Transgender Monster Buffalo Bill from *The Silence of the Lambs*, Halberstam writes: “The nineteenth-century monster is marked by racial or species violation while Buffalo Bill seems to be all gender. If we measure one skin job against the other, we can read transitions between various signifying systems of identity” (6). The switch involving these “signifying systems of identity” did not, of course, take place in a historical vacuum. It is my assertion that the 1950s cultural era went a long way towards producing the monster as gender and sexual deviant. This is due to a variety of socio-cultural, historical and political conditions, including the Cold War, McCarthyism, the specter of homosexuality as a “security risk” and a moral threat, the emergence of dime store pop psychology and popularized Freudianism and psychoanalysis, and the emphasis on hyper-normal *Leave it to Beaver* white, heteronormative, middle-class families. In addition, the 1950s saw the emergence of a
very widely-reported killer and grave-robber named Ed Gein, whom I mentioned previously in Chapter One. As we shall see, Gein would serve as the basis for a variety of fictionalized murderers in popular film, including Leatherface, from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation*, and the aforementioned Buffalo Bill. The first fictionalized character, and perhaps the most important that Gein inspired, however, was Norman Bates from Robert Bloch’s novel *Psycho*, published in 1959. The novel, of course, was turned into a film of the same name one year later, when master director Alfred Hitchcock took Bloch’s book and turned it into a cinematic classic.

The Transgender Monster is a recurring stereotype in the transgender media canon, most commonly seen in slasher films but occasionally in dramas, suspense and action films as well. While previously the demarcation between animal and human was cast as monstrous, historical developments and the tastes of audiences changed this. Audiences began to fear not some mythical animal-human hybrid creature that does not exist in reality, but the very real people who live right next door. But the “normative” human beings, defined as they are in popular culture as law-abiding and safe, would not sufficiently frighten audiences who had become accustomed to human-animal hybrid monsters or outrageous Godzilla movies. Due to stigmas around gender and sexual “deviation” from 1950s hegemonic norms, gender and sexual variance came to be seen as frightening in and of itself. The Transgender Monster was born to scare the devil out of audiences who were programmed by dominant society, including paranoid fears of communism and virulently homophobic panic and anxiety.

The rise of the Transgender Monster began in earnest in the 1950s resulting from
the publicity surrounding the aforementioned Ed Gein, who was arrested in his hometown of Plainfield, Wisconsin in 1957 for the murder of two women. Author Bloch was living near Gein’s hometown of Plainfield when the story broke, and used the murders as the basis for his novel. In his article from *Jump Cut*, K.E. Sullivan carefully traces the Ed Gein case and its relationship to the birth of the Transgender Monster stereotype. The association between Gein and gender-variance is due to pervasive allegations that Gein was using the bodies of his female victims to create a woman’s skin suit, and to long-standing rumors that Gein was a transsexual. Sullivan painstakingly examines the evidence to find that the allegations of Gein’s transsexualism were based largely on rumor and innuendo rather than on solid empirical evidence. Sullivan writes:

> The 1950’s fear that homosexuality existed everywhere and posed a threat to everyone is apparent in the media’s representation of Ed Gein as effeminate, a transvestite or transsexual (and the narrative trope that these conditions ‘explain’ his psychosis) and the subsequent fictionalizations of his crimes that stress one of the other of these diagnoses (8).

As should be obvious, the lineage here is incredibly complex and multilayered. The notion that Gein was a gay man, a cross-dresser or a transsexual is disputed. How much writer Phillip Bloch truly relied on the facts of the case, and how much was fictionalized and/or based on his own biases and prejudices is unknown. From there, the character was further transformed for Alfred Hitchcock’s filmic version *Psycho*. In addition, it is thought that other writers and directors (such as Thomas Harris, Kim Henkel, Tobe Hooper and Jonathan Demme, to name just a few) further mined the story of Ed Gein and/or Norman Bates to suggest a linkage between psychotic
behavior and gender distress. It becomes obvious quite rapidly, to even a casual observer, that the linkage is not based on empirical fact or even a faithful translation of Gein’s life and tragic misdeeds, but on bias, prejudice and cultural indoctrination. In her essay “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix” Susan Stryker discusses the relationship between transsexuality and monstrosity through examining the literary figure of Victor Frankenstein. Her writing also helps to illuminate how dominant society constructs transsexuality as inherently monstrous:

The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that which it was born. In these circumstances, I find a deep affinity between myself as a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment (245).

From Frankenstein to the transsexual, as Stryker proves, is not much of a cultural leap. Thus, I would like to assert in this chapter that although Gein was somewhat important to the creation of the Transgender Monster stereotype, his case would be wholly inadequate to perpetuate, maintain and sustain a myth of such colossal cultural force. The acts and story of Ed Gein emerged in an American cultural epoch marked by McCarthyism, mother-blaming Freudian pop psychology as well as legitimate psychoanalysis, and the homophobic, misogynistic and racist cultural order that could not deal productively with difference. As Sullivan writes:
Interesting and enlightening in both the reportage of Gein’s crimes and the fictionalized accounts about him are the particular elements that these accounts highlight or repeat. Specifically, the accounts cannot offer much information to support the conclusion that Gein was a transgendered individual or gay; indeed, he was quite clearly interested in women even if none returned this interest. Nor are most transgendered persons psychotic or murderers. In fact, most serial killers are heterosexual men whose victims are women or children.

In all of my extensive reading on mass murderers, serial killers and sexual psychopaths, I have yet to come across a report of an actual transvestite or transsexual psychopath. Yet the cultural association persists—to the detriment of differently-gendered people everywhere.

(5)

Transgender monstrosity is a tremendous threat to the smooth and orderly maintenance of patriarchy, heterosexual reproduction and the nuclear family. In a 1950s time frame dominated by images like Leave it to Beaver, the desire to bend, deconstruct and even abolish strict and rigid gender and sexual roles was virtually unthinkable. It would not be until 1963 when Betty Friedan sounded the alarm and rebuked white, middle-class families for the damage they did to women’s lives, aspirations and abilities. The 1950s conservatism, anxiety and imposition of clearly demarcated roles set the stage for the cultural revolutions of the 1960s. The civil rights movement, the women’s movement and the burgeoning gay rights movement each helped to challenge social norms and hegemonic cultural institutions. However, the transgender movement did not
enter the American scene in any substantive way until the early to mid 1990s. With the appearance of Phillip Bloch’s 1959 Novel *Psycho*, and its film adaptation in 1960, the Transgender Monster began and has continued to the present day unabated. With 50 years under its belt, the Transgender Monster has gained a veritable foothold in the consciousness of the American spectator. At the heart of Transgender Monstrosity lies a series of threats to the patriarchal order, which is produced and maintained through the strict regulation of gender and sexuality. Adherence to gender and sexual normality is maintained through the deployment of figurative gender cops, who police and survey people’s behavior through the meting out of punishments for slight and substantial infractions. These punishments can range from mild rebuke to terroristic violence and murder. Seen through the prism of the Foucauldian paradigm of power, these acts of disciplining and punishing are usually accomplished not through top-down power directives, but through the implicit consent of the masses. Transgender Monstrosity is also a phenomenon very much in line with Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject. Describing the process of abjection, Barbara Creed states that it is a means of:

separating out the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject. Ritual becomes a means by which societies both renew their initial contact with the abject element and then exclude that element. Through ritual, the demarcation lines between the human and the non-human are drawn up anew and presumably made all the stronger for that process (8).
Going to the slasher film might be construed as a contemporary popular ritual for many society members. Through this mediated ritual, cissexual spectators can engage with the Transgender Monster, but also draw firm dividing lines between their own sense of “normalcy” and the abject deviancy of the cinematically constructed “Other.” Through collective spectatorship, viewers can presumably reify what is normative and what is “freakish” because the monstrous elements are almost always thrown out. I believe this process is also linked to surveillance of bodies within the Foucauldian-described societal framework in postmodern societies:

> Surveillance and observation are now everywhere, all the time. The Panopticon, designed by Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham is a tower from which doctor, teacher or foreman can spy on and penetrate behavior. It locates bodies in space, in relation to each other. The subjects under surveillance never know quite when they are being watched, and so effectively police themselves. The seeing machine has become a transparent building in which the exercise of power may be supervised by society as a whole. (Horrocks 118)

Just recently a male-bodied friend of mine wore large, dangly earrings to his job as a clerk at a large department store. His mother came into the store and told him he should remove them. She followed that up with a text message rebuking his behavior. The Transgender Monster is partially produced through “gender cops” trying to make gender atypicality as shocking and threatening as possible.

In a heterosexist, homosocial cultural order, it is expected that men must both separate from women in order to become properly masculinized subjects and sexually
bond with them in order to become proper heterosexual subjects. This rather paradoxical view and double standard is part and parcel of a patriarchal society which both insists upon men being “one of the boys” while also being a “stud,” “ladies’ man” or “Casanova.” Part of proper masculinization involves separation from the mother. Pop psychology in the 1950s stressed that the overbearing or domineering mother could result in a “queer” son. As Tharp writes:

One may argue that Norman Bates’s character exploits general anxiety over the Freudian Oedpial paradigm so well fostered by the 1950’s focus on the perfect family and Betty Crocker/Donna Reed/June Cleaver moms… Norman’s is a cautionary tale. Although love of mother is certainly desirable, those apron strings had better be cut before the boy loses the urge to ‘be a man.’

A dominant woman is dangerous under patriarchy, because she could exert too much control and thus throw off the balance of the gender roles. A son could conceivably become “emasculated” through enduring such a matriarchal upbringing, and this could cause him to become not only gender-distressed but even psychotic or murderous. The extremity of this fear is given voice in the realm of representation. While perhaps not doing so intentionally, the image of the Transgender Monster is a lesson in gender-normative-supremacy. The prevailing wisdom of the time (Freud and pop-psychology) said: Look what happens if a male-bodied person is not raised in the correct patriarchal manner; look what happens if he blurs the line of what it means to be a man. The results are projected through the cinematic image as ultimately catastrophic.
However, in addition to this, Psycho can also be seen as a critical comment on the supposed safety and happiness of the suburban American existence. As Kendall R. Phillips writes:

*Psycho* represents a dramatic shift in the nature of American horror films. Not only had Hitchcock brought horror into the ‘house next door,’ but he had cloaked it in all the apparent trappings of normal American suburban life… The suburban dream of a secluded and private family home is revealed as a sterile and claustrophobic environment where the human spirit becomes twisted and distorted (78-79).

Paradoxically, *Psycho* both critiques and reifies American traditions, revealing the multilayered ideologies coded in the filmic narrative.

Sadly, to many people in this society, particularly on a more subconscious level, transgender women are seen as inherently monstrous. Through mixing components of male and female, masculine and feminine, they transgress one of the most sacred of cultural taboos. Disloyalty to masculinity is shown as having tragic and fatal results, and why would it not be thus? Adherence by males to patriarchal norms, power and privilege are the building blocks that our current masculinist culture is built upon. If one crosses the gender line, one may go berserk and start killing, particularly the women by whom one has been so cruelly “emasculated.” Even more powerful to me is the fear that these images engender in audiences across the world. Ultimately, it is my belief that Ed Gein was not the progenitor of the Transgender Monster. Robert Bloch’s *fictional* Norman Bates, and the many imitators that followed were the progenitors. My belief is precisely because Bates and these other characters emerged not from a factual case, but from the
creativity of the human mind. These minds belong predominantly to heterosexual men who are mired in the system of patriarchy and who reproduce its logics in their written and filmic work.9

I certainly believe that Alfred Hitchcock’s Psycho (1960) is a veritable cinematic masterpiece. It is one of the most oft-discussed films in screen history and is justifiably heralded as a classic in the oeuvre of films generally and horror movies specifically. Despite its problematic gender issues, it does contain cultural critique about the illusions of contemporary life. However, many people almost overlook the fact that Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) dresses as his mother in the film.10 Sadly, this association with cross-dressing sets the stage for a mini-canon of films that followed.

**Horror Movies and the Politics of Trans**

Horror films present, overtly or subliminally, that which most terrifies us. Sociopathic monsters are greatly feared by many in “mainstream” U.S. society. Being violently murdered, for instance, is an overt fear of many people, particularly when it involves an extended stalking or period of torture.11 When it comes to gender and sexuality, horror films are a minefield of potential fears and anxieties. The specters of female aggression and sexual agency, queer male desire and homoeroticism, and transgender behaviors and identities are frequent fears invoked in the realm of the slasher film. Kendall R. Phillips asserts that in horror movies there is a “strong resonance between the elements within the film and various anxieties existing in the broader culture” (7). Given the prevalence of transphobia in society, it came as no surprise to me that the representation of the transgender person was overwhelmingly negative. As David Gilmore writes: “The mind needs monsters. Monsters embody all that is
dangerous and horrible in the human imagination” (1). In order for a horror film to work there needs to be a degree of revulsion against the killer and for that matter, many of the victims as well. However, there also needs to be an explanation for the killer’s bloody misdeeds. Most disturbing is that the trans killer’s rationales are often linked to being inadequate or deficient “men” under the sign of the patriarchy. Their status as gender victim, which may initially elicit some degree of sympathy, is then quickly turned into the status of Transgender Monster. The transgenderism, however, is not merely an offshoot or added component of their overall “emasculcation.” It is, in my view, the very epitome or zenith of their failure to embody societal norms of heterosexuality and masculinity.

Through representing the trans person as a monster, mass media helps to control and monitor sex-gender “purity.” As Mary Douglas writes:

I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the different between male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created (4)

In the same vein, exaggerating differences between “straight” and queer, between cissexual and transsexual, further the fiction of a coherent gender and sexual system. The ultimate way of “punishing transgressions” is to destroy them, as through the numerous hate crimes documented in the U.S. and around the globe. As Douglas writes, “hybrids and other confusions are abominated” (53). However, the media casting them as pathological also helps to further the problematic diagnoses of “GID”12 and to
perpetuate the specious notion of gender variance as synonymous with insanity and sociopathic behavior within the regime of a heterosexist, patriarchal, transphobic U.S. culture. Like white supremacy in regards to whiteness, gender-normative-supremacy often casts non-conformity to masculine, heterosexual, maleness, and feminine, heterosexual, femaleness as sociopathic, and this world view is evident in a plethora of media, including magazines, television shows, films, newspapers, and the Internet.13

As mentioned previously, trans people are often victims of violence and not perpetrators of violence. A threat to the maintenance of fictive sex-gender purity, a transgender subject constitutes what Douglas terms a “Polluting person.” She writes that: “A Polluting person is always in the wrong. He has developed some wrong condition or simply crossed some line which should not have been crossed and this displacement unleashes danger” (113). Trans people are murdered at an alarming rate in the United States. While the average person has a 1 in 18,000 chance of being murdered, for transpeople this figure jumps to 1 in 12 (Brown).14 “Over-kill” characterizes many of these crimes. This means there is more physical violence used than is needed to produce death. There is an almost maniacal level of hatred used that is about more than just killing the person. The violence becomes symbolic: it is about killing everything that the person represents. The killer of trans people is attempting to restore the supposed purity of the sex-gender system established under patriarchy. As Gordene MacKenzie points out, the “homicidal maniac who targets gender minorities is almost always a white, heterosexual ‘masculine’ male, a living emblem of America’s highly dichotomized sex and gender code” (138). As a trans-feminist activist, I would characterize this hateful violence as sociopathic. However, within a patriarchal worldview, the antithesis is
created on screen. The transgender person is cast not as victim but as victimizer. While in society it is the trans person’s perceived transgression that must be violently curtailed, on screen a patriarchal reversal of reality occurs and trans people are represented as violent.

I assert that this reversal perpetuates a discursive violence that is visited upon the vulnerable bodies of transpeople in the U.S. and around the globe. Trans people seem to be a favorite media scapegoat. All of the contradictions and anxieties inherent in our repugnant gender order come bubbling to the surface. Media can serve as a powerful arm of the cultural, ideological machine to submerge and squelch these floating resistances. To reverse reality is to play wild with the truth, and to play unfairly at that. How does the media demonize trans people? I believe they do so through associating them with evil and portraying them as the contaminators of a system of purity. This system is based on race, class, gender, sexuality, ability and other factors. Whatever the offending term, it must be put back in its place, even if such a maneuver requires violence in order to comply. Media discourse is one such site of violence and spin doctoring, a site that often protects the privilege of those in power while justifying and encouraging the scapegoating of culturally despised and disempowered groups.

Despite the prevalence of hatred and violence directed against gender-variant people, the media has been slow to depict this in ways sympathetic to trans people. An exception is the fairly sympathetic national media attention on the hate crime directed against Nebraskan Brandon Teena, which inspired a documentary, 1998’s *The Brandon Teena Story*, a narrative film, 1999’s *Boy’s Don’t Cry*, as well as the true-crime book *All She [sic] Wanted* by Aphrodite Jones. Also, Lifetime created a TV movie about the life
and death of Latina transgender teen Gwen Araujo, 2006’s *A Girl Like Me: The Gwen Araujo Story*. Despite these notable exceptions, media culture has been more interested in portraying the exact reversal of the transgender victim: the transgender sociopath. In the next section, I wish to discuss the history of this representation and why it is so important to examine.

**A Brief History of the “She-Male Psycho” Mini-Cannon**

The term “she-male” originates from the world of pornography. Real-life transgender and transsexual women do not identify as “she-males.” In fact, the term is seen as an epithet that delegitimizes a trans woman’s female identity. The “she-male” of pornography is a genderized and sexualized exotic object, constructed of larger-than-life signifiers that both contradict and conform to hegemonic norms. The “she-male” in pornography is typically portrayed in ways similar to cisgender women in pornography, with the notable exception that she has a large and “fully-functional” penis, and testicles. The possession of large breasts and a large penis is usually considered as the “best of both worlds” within the realm of “she-male” pornography. This is a phrase that seems to appeal to consumers of this sub-genre of pornography, and thus producers use it to increase sales and profits. The Transgender Monster of slasher films is very similar to the “she-male slut” of pornographic films and magazines. Feminist film theorist Linda Williams coined the phrase “body genres” to label horror, pornographic and melodramatic films which call attention to spectators’ corporeal experiences. Williams identifies violence, orgasm and weeping as primary and intense bodily/emotional responses that engender significant corporeal interaction with media textualities. It is my contention that the orgasm elicited in “she-male” pornography is pay-back for
allegiance to the genre’s very limited and particular framing of transgender women. In a similar fashion, viewers of films featuring Transgender Monsters have a similar corporeal response—the fear of violence. This fear of violence, mixed up as it is with images of gender transgression, reinforce beliefs that demonize transgender subjectivities.

After *Psycho*, two of the best-known continuations of this trend were De Palma’s misogynistic film *Dressed to Kill* (1980) and Demme’s 1990 film *The Silence of the Lambs*. Many people are quick to point out that Jame Gumb, the transgender serial killer in *The Silence of the Lambs*, is emphatically described by investigator Clarice Starling as *not* being a transsexual, i.e. Jame does not fit the diagnostic criteria set out in the DSM (the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) for “gender identity disorder.” For instance, Marjorie Garber refers to the film as “determinedly politically correct” because “Buffalo Bill is not a transsexual, and both transsexuals and gender clinics are exonerated from even associated blame” (116). My reply to that is that while Gumb may not warrant an official diagnosis of transsexualism, his gender-variance bleeds into public perception of deviance, criminality and sociopathic behavior. To suppose that the general viewing public cleanly dissociates Gumb from the threat of gender variance because Starling officially declares that he is not a true transsexual, and that transsexuals are “passive,” itself a disempowering and demeaning stereotype, is ludicrous. Furthermore, the film also perpetuates the “gate-keeping” idea of transsexualism, which puts the power in the hands of psychiatrists and other medical professionals rather than in the hands of trans people themselves. The proof is in the proverbial pudding and the damage is done. As Viviane Namaste writes, “Although not a transsexual, it is clear that Buffalo Bill is gender dysphoric. To merely accept psychiatric categories of gender identity, as Garber does, is to unwittingly legitimate the institution’s control in both regulating and defining transsexuality” (15).
Like *Psycho, The Silence of the Lambs* is in many ways an amazing and highly entertaining film, however, it does not change the fact that it participates in circulating a cultural code that associates trans people with violent, homicidal aggression and insanity.

However, as will be seen in the analyses that follow, the situation is complicated. Horror films provide a location where viewers can confront that which makes them anxious. In essence, viewers are working out and working through, often subliminally, complex emotional issues through interfacing with cinematic terror. While there is certainly demonization of the trans killer, there is also sympathy, identification and pleasure with her/him. It is precisely this ambiguity that makes analyzing the trans killer so complex. While I do not see these texts as progressive, per se, I do believe that fulminating gender anxieties cannot be contained according to the patriarchal party line. In these moments of subversion, we can find interstices of liberatory potential. In addition, they are intensely revelatory moments that shine a light on the way that gender oppression is woven into the very fabric of American society. Further, might the transsexual spectator find a sympathetic identification with the monster image, or discover an ironic sense of empowerment through being so defined?

Since *Psycho, Dressed to Kill* and *The Silence of the Lambs* have been widely discussed in film literature, I have decided to analyze films which are less popular and therefore less subject to film criticism. These films, like so many films in the slasher/horror genre, are often called “B-movies.” B-movies are generally low-budget commercial films, and are often associated with a particular genre. Many horror films are considered B-movies because they were made quickly on a low budget and conform to generic conventions. In the “high” and “low” cultural divide, B-movies are at the
opposite side of the spectrum compared to high quality films like *Psycho* and *The Silence of the Lambs*. I would argue though that B-movies are just as worthy of cultural criticism as the more “high-profile” films. In fact, since they have received so little attention, they are ripe for deeper and more complex analysis than a simple film review. In addition, these films often lack a more elaborate artistic production and have minimal or poor film production values. In addition to poor reviews, they often are dismissed because of their low budgets and lack of high-profile actors and expensive advertising. Nonetheless, they often find an audience on home video/DVD and even become “cult classics” in some cases.

In the remainder of the chapter, I will be examining the following horror films geared towards teen/young adult audiences: *Terror Train* (1980), *Sleepaway Camp* (1983), and *Cherry Falls* (2000). My goal is to investigate the systems of misogyny, heterosexism and transphobia in the films. While I assert that patriarchal violence and the consolidation of masculinist, gender-normativity is at the heart of these films’ ideological missions, I also search for moments of potential slippages where alternative readings are made possible.

**Terror Train: The Mobile Ejaculating Phallus**

*Terror Train* is a teen slasher film and was released in 1980. The first scene takes place at a college fraternity party where numerous co-eds are standing around a bonfire drinking, a set-up for the next scene that shows a cruel prank about to be played on a guy named Kenny Hampson (Derek MacKinnon). Presumably a pledge, the frat brothers decide it is time to get Kenny “laid.” They claim to have taken care of everything and escort him up the stairs to his “girl.” Kenny is portrayed as a “geek” with thick glasses
and a non-macho demeanor. Kenny removes his outer shirt and pants. Alana Maxwell (Jamie Lee Curtis) takes part in the prank and is the voice of the girl, but she is not the body. She tells Kenny: “Don’t be shy, this is my first time too.” He removes his glasses and goes to the body. When Kenny goes to the bed to kiss his “girl,” he discovers that she is a corpse. The corpse has no arms. The architect of the prank, the aptly named macho man Doc Manley, had stolen the corpse while at his job in a hospital. Kenny then appears to go completely crazy, screaming and wrapping himself over and over in the cloth from the canopy bed. All the guys from the frat come in to have a good laugh. He begins to moan in an animal-like manner and the opening credits roll.

Zoom forward three years. Now seniors, the students from the beginning of the film are to graduate soon, and decide to go to a costume party aboard a train, where the rest of the film takes place. As the students wait for the train to leave, a class-clown type talks to a blow-up doll and states: “Just my luck, she’s a lesbian.” He is the first person killed; incredulously, nobody notices he has been left behind.

Doc is the film’s alpha-male and boyfriend of lead—and perhaps alpha—female, Alana. When the incident comes up in an early scene with a group of co-eds onboard the train, Doc shows no regret, although Alana does. Doc has a particular homoerotic streak. When his best buddy, Mo, states that he is afraid that his girlfriend is going to dump him, Doc looks at his friend lovingly and states: “Well if she dumps you, you always got me you know. I mean it.” The following dialogue is typical:

Doc: “These girls look faint. Can we do anything to revive them?”

Mo: “I don’t know. Maybe some kind of injection?”

Doc: “You girls better come back to the consulting room with us. We
may need to do an exploratory... Mo and I worked in an emergency
gynecological ward last summer.”

Mo: “Doc won an award.”

Doc: “Best pap smear in a supporting role.”

I believe this dialogue, while ostensibly about women, is more about the
homoerotic bond between the two men. Their homosocial bond is cemented over the
objectified bodies of women, a typical scenario within patriarchy.

Meanwhile, most partiers are watching a magic show, with the magician’s
assistant being levitated and then disappearing altogether. Interestingly, a sizeable chunk
of the film is devoted to magic, with a magician and his assistant performing several
times for an audience. A very young-looking David Copperfield portrays the magician,
Ken. His female assistant is tall, willowy and always has her neck-area covered. Doc
states that he hates magic, a foreshadowing comment that will come back to haunt him.

When several women open up the yearbook to the old Sigma Phi Omega section
and see a picture of Kenny, Doc states: “Oh, that’s just Kenny. He couldn’t handle it.”
The film asserts it was Kenny’s inability to withstand the harassing/hazing atmosphere of
the fraternity that is to blame, rather than the sadistic act of Doc and his buddies.
Although as viewers we are not certain at this point, for clarity here Kenny is the killer on
the train, but he is constantly in disguise.

Kenny disguises himself in another partygoer’s costume—a green lizard suit—
and a sexy and drunk blonde named Mitchie tries to seduce him. Mitchie is Alana’s best
friend. (Similar to the men, the two have a female “homosocial bonding” moment in a
previous scene where they confessed their mutual love for one another.) As they start to
get intimate, Kenny, wearing the green lizard suit, kills Mitchie. This murder mimics the original sadistic prank in that it starts out as a scene of seduction: Mitchie attempts to seduce the costumed killer, but this time, he promptly murders her. Next, Doc discovers that his friend Mo has been stabbed to death. Now both of the homosocial bonds have been severed.

Eventually, the conductors decide to stop and evacuate the train when they get wind of the violence. While standing outside the train waiting for the investigation to begin, Alana says: “Doc, we hurt him… It wasn’t just a prank. Doc, he was sick. I went to the hospital just afterwards. They wouldn’t let me see him. They said he killed somebody before. They said it might have been an accident but he killed somebody.”

At this point, Doc and Alana get back on the train in an effort to apprehend the killer. They have figured out that it is Kenny, but they do not know what he looks like, costumed. Doc is killed when trying to apprehend the perpetrator. He gets locked in one of the train cars and sees a female hand, with a ring and nail polish. He thinks it is Mitchie and that the whole thing is a practical joke. Next, his throat is slit. When Alana and the conductor find him, his head falls out of the overhead bin; he has been completely decapitated.

Finally, Kenny, dressed in an old-man ghoul mask, comes upon Alana, only to find that it is the “lesbian” blow up doll seen at the beginning that he stabs. Alana then stabs him with a huge sword and thinks the ordeal is over. But as she walks away, the still-alive would-be killer makes another attempt. When they are locked in one of the cars, he slams her against a wall and begins to strangle her. She bites his hand and they continue to struggle. She sprays him with a canister of soda water then locks herself in
an office cage. Kenny puts a steel oar through a square hole of the cage. Alana yells: “Kenny, please!” She stabs him in the face and they both run out. It appears that Kenny has fallen from the train, but he is still hanging on. As Alana rests, thinking Kenny is dead, we see his reflection in the window directly behind her. She is not aware that he is still alive as she walks along an aisle of the train. She discovers that the magician has also been murdered. In their final encounter, Kenny is dressed like the train conductor named Charlie, and Alana thinks it is him as she sits down and “Charlie” takes her hand. Dressed like the conductor, Kenny is wearing a clear plastic mask that distorts his features. He rips off the mask, then carefully removes the conductor hat to shake free his long blonde hair. Interspersed with the removal of the cap are scenes of the magician’s assistant. He then removes his blonde wig, takes the fake teeth from his mouth and wipes off his lipstick. Alana states: “Kenny, I’m sorry. I never told you. I’m so sorry.” Kenny replies: “You haven’t changed,” in a deep gravelly voice. “I saw your picture in the year book. I never knew you liked magic.” Kenny says, “I watched you tonight. You liked him.” “No, Kenny you’re better than he is, I’m sure you’re better than he is.” He yanks her closer. “You don’t have to do this.” “Kiss me Alana. Kiss me.” She leans forward to kiss him. After their kiss, he looks at his hands and, like in the earlier scene where he was set up, begins twirling around. The real conductor Charlie comes in from behind and smacks him over the head with a snow shovel, and continues smacking and kicking him out a door of the train. He falls into a ravine far below and is shown floating in the stream face down. The final shot is of the train rolling along at a brisk speed. The closing credits, blood red, begin to roll.
The film is rather dull and lackluster overall, and represents a heterosexual, homosocial environment of young adults. It both solidifies this environment and subjects it to critique. One by one, the masked murderer kills the fraternity brothers. The killer frequently switches masks and uses the mask of the victims to confuse the other partygoers. The contained, controlled environment of the train, reminiscent of *Murder on the Orient Express*, makes the film particularly cloying and claustrophobic. The first victim is brutally murdered in a tiny bathroom, with the masked corpse left in a pool of blood. The train itself represents a monumental phallic symbol, an enclosed and engorged member thrusting through the landscape of patriarchy. The caretakers, the conductors, ultimately lead the nearly derailed phallus back to proper penetrative intercourse. Kenny’s attraction for Alana causes him to want to kill her, but she takes a position of dominance, even spraying him with fizzy water, representing a symbolic female ejaculation all over Kenny’s body. But Alana’s power is circumscribed when the conductor comes in and bashes Kenny over the head with the shovel. Alana is not allowed to be the hero and must submit to patriarchal rescue. However, within this pecking order of gender power, it is Kenny who is truly at the bottom. His total ejection/ejaculation from the train is highly symbolic: his presence on the train/phallus is insidious, and his abrupt and violent removal is restorative. His placement in a body of water, the classic symbol of the feminine, is chilling and final. The final scene is of the mobile phallus/train, newly erect, rapidly thrusting back into congruence with patriarchy.

Is the classic unveiling, or “de-wigging” at the end, just a twist for shock value? Gary Gaymon writes: “*Terror Train’s* tranny twist is just that, a twist… The trans twist at this film’s climax remains one of the best surprise killer-reveals ever.” However, I
believe it is more significant than that. Like *Sleepaway Camp* (which I will discuss below) the norms of gender and sexuality are turned on their heads throughout the film, and this is cause for gender alarm. Kenny Hampson represents the queer, not in the traditional homosexual sense, but in the sense that he is not sufficiently masculine, not sufficiently brutal and not sufficiently homosocial. The male and female homosocial bondings that occur between Doc and Mo, and Alana and Mitchie, respectively, are very important here. This homosociality is in constant contradistinction to requisite heterosexuality. To be a properly gendered being under the regime of gender-normative-supremacy means, automatically, to walk a strange tightrope between homosocial friendships and heterosexual, romantic relationships. In sensing the normality of Doc, Mo, Mitchie and Alana, the confused and denigrated Kenny seeks to destroy that which he lacks, that which he has been explicitly told that he does not possess. It may seem ironic that the moments of homosociality are marked as normative, but it is actually in keeping with patriarchy. Fraternities, which are heavily referenced in this film, are extremely homosocial, but generally they are also homophobic, misogynistic and sexist as well.

Conversely, guys like Doc are reviled for their excessive masculinity and the overt pleasure they take in sadistic acts. What should have been Kenny’s unremarkable first sexual experience was transformed into a ghastly experience that would scar anyone deeply. Kenny is picked on for being a geeky, puny, “other” who is constantly marginalized for his deviant social status. As viewers, we are certainly meant to identify with Kenny’s pain and mistreatment at the hands of patriarchal agents. But to what extent is that initial burst of sympathy short-circuited at the revealing of Kenny as a
murderer, a cross-dressed one at that? The path from gender victim to Transgender Monster is not a very long one.

Ironically, the “primal” scene at the film’s beginning represents Kenny trying to become gender-normative and compulsorily heterosexual. However, this earnest stab at a shot for sex-gender normalcy is viciously thwarted by the sorority sisters and fraternity brothers. Instead of losing his virginity and thus entering the heretofore unavailable world of hegemonic, heterosexual masculinity, Kenny discovers that “his woman” is not only dead, she has no arms. Throughout the film, Doc minimizes the psychological damage that he and his cohorts inflicted on Kenny. To him, Kenny should just have reacted like one of the guys when a prank is played: play it off and move on, or seek your revenge. He does indeed seek his revenge, but it is not through the route that Doc would expect; this incident has driven Kenny to the brink of insanity. His fragile masculinity has been tested one too many times. Rather than engage in non-lethal revenge pranks, Kenny becomes a killing machine. Through the logic of patriarchy, he regains his masculinity by avenging the damage done to his psyche, through making the hegemonic agents of his oppression pay the ultimate price: with their lives.

One of the key concepts in psychoanalytic theory is the concept of trauma. Laplanche and Pontalis define trauma as “an event in the subject’s life defined by its intensity, by the subject’s inability to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in psychical organization” (465). The thwarted heterosexual experience constitutes a major trauma in Kenny’s life, one that causes him to lash out in an explosion of violent rage. The rotting corpse, a key signifier of Kristeva’s theory of abjection, becomes irretrievably linked to Kenny’s burgeoning
sexuality and sense of masculinity. But the intensity of this trauma can only be given significance within the logics of the larger cultural framework. While certainly what happened to Kenny was sadistic and damaging, the full weight of the affects of the act are due to the particular construction of masculinity in patriarchy, which experiences assaults on its nature as catastrophic.

Mirroring the typical misogyny of the slasher film, when Mitchie goes off with a guy on the train she is drunk and acting in a very sexual and seductive manner. When they get back to the bed in her sleeping car, she begins to assert her sexuality, only to discover that under the mask is the killer, who quickly slashes her to death. As with many horror films, women who act in a sexually assertive manner are swiftly punished for their violation from the sacred codes of feminine sexual virtue. In addition, the scene has a specific meaning because it harkens back to Kenny being seduced at the film’s beginning. The sexual assertiveness of these women is another driving force for his madness. Emasculated and seen as dubiously heterosexual, his revenge is to literally kill off the source of his gender anxiety and terror. As with Norman Bates in *Psycho*, Kenny must destroy that which excites his libido. Through being so terrorized, he becomes a gender terrorist himself.

Perhaps the most vital questions that remains is: why does Kenny transform into a woman? I believe it is because he cannot survive in the sex-gender-sexuality landscape that he has entered. If one cannot “make it” as a “real man” within a sexual binary, one has the choice of becoming feminized or ceasing to exist. Due to constant failure to thrive or even survive in this hostile realm, he does the only thing he can: he transforms himself through illusion. Although the film often feels plodding and tedious, there is a
way in which a more complex reading is made possible through the use of masking, veiling, illusion and artifice. Male becomes female, murderer becomes victim, human becomes animal, etc. Through the use of costume and masks, nothing is ever quite what it seems. In this way, the film escapes its murder-by-number fate to rise to a more sophisticated and complex level. In addition, the film engages the trope of hybridity, the mixture between genders and species, as well as the ambiguous demarcation between magic and reality. “In whatever culture, monsters are bizarre composites, made up of pieces of a reassembled reality… Monsters do indeed challenge—reshuffle—the very foundation of our known world” (Gilmore 189). Kenny’s “reassembled reality” provokes terror amongst the partiers on the train, even as the haziness between the illusory and the real confound them at every turn.

I find it important that the macho fraternity leader, Doc, is the one who states unequivocally that he does not believe in magic. Magic and illusion, not easily explained within the logics of Christianity and patriarchy, represent a challenge to Doc’s worldview. When Kenny, dressed *en femme*, begins to kill him, Doc believes that it is Mitchie come back to life, and that the whole killing ordeal has been another practical joke. The idea of a male gender illusionist is unfathomable to him. Alana, representing Carol Clover’s notion of “the final girl,” the lone female who often out-survives everyone else in typical slasher films, is able to outfox her male counterparts Doc and Mo. 

However, the important and potentially feminist subversion of the final girl is largely undone in this film. At literally the 11th hour, the train conductor Charlie comes in armed with a shovel and bashes the “gender-deviant” into oblivion. The kindly conductor, who throughout the film has a stern but fatherly attitude, is often shown in homosocial scenes
with other men working on the train. Once again, the gender-sexual landscape that is shown reflects the hegemonic vision of society, simultaneously rigorous in both its homosociality and heterosexuality.

In a different reading, although queerness and transgender is refracted through a patriarchal lens, it is not absent. As in the films to follow, *Terror Train* does not completely contain gender contradictions. Alana might not land the final blow but she still plays a significant role in bringing down the killer, and she survives. Über-macho Doc gets his comeuppance and Kenny gets his revenge by fooling them with his mastery of illusion. These and other moments allow spectators to receive pleasure and perform readings “against the grain.” While this does not erase the notion of a dominant narrative, viewers often negotiate with cinematic images to reach their own preferred conclusions. While Doc and the others cavalierly dismiss Kenny’s pain, it is Alana who is steadfastly compassionate. Perhaps her more open and kindly spirit is ultimately rewarded since she lives on.

Despite this potential, the cross-dressed killer is still frightening in his transphobic representation. Both at the beginning and the end, he becomes—as we shall see—like Angela at the end of *Sleepaway Camp*, animal-like in his utter madness. Spinning around in cloth and wailing in a guttural, beast-like tone, he is transformed into the most shocking of all gender monsters: the male driven to dress like a woman, driven to kill, driven to madness. Although the cultural code of gender-crosser as monster can be contested by viewers, it is not irrational to ponder the ill effects of the Transgender Monster representation in marrying gender transgression with sociopathic behaviors. I think that the potential imprint left on the psyche of a viewer is chilling, particularly if
that viewer has an already negative view of gender-variant people. Like the trope of
deception, the trope of monstrosity caters to the production and maintenance of
stereotypes that malign the humanity of the trans community.

Perhaps most importantly, since Kenny seems to fail at typical homosocial,
masculinist bonding, the stakes are all the higher for him to pass the test of compulsory
heterosexuality. When he flunks this gender test as well, he is, in a sense, “done for”
under the terms of patriarchal, gender-normative heterosexism. That he kills, and that he
becomes “woman-like” through cross-dressing, is almost cast as a natural effect of the
trauma he has sustained in the society, particularly following the dictates of patriarchal,
psychoanalytic discourse. That his attempt at “normal” heterosexual intercourse has been
so violently interrupted renders him into a sort of castrated male, whose lack of manhood
is so severe that dressing as a woman is almost a natural consequence. The de-wigging
climax, in which Kenny is dressed as a train conductor in a clear plastic mask, who then
takes off the conductor cap and blond wig and is shown to be the magician’s assistant, is
a genuinely terrifying scene. What producers/writers may have cast as a shocking,
Hitchcockian twist takes on radically different relevancy when placed under the
microscopic lens of transgender political liberation. As a viewer, I was curiously
intrigued with the blurring of identities here, between persons and between genders.
Transgender politics opens up a positive space, a space of celebration, for blurring,
violating and transcending traditional boundaries of gender. And yet, because of the
nefarious depiction of the character, this boundary violation is not seen as subversive or
liberatory but as sick, depraved and dangerous. The film seems to suggest that if you
seek an end to strict gender policing, this is what will result. Under patriarchy,
hegemonic gender roles and their strict enforcement are synonymous with order and safety; violate their sanctity and you are left with violence, mayhem and anarchy.

Although many viewers would empathize with Kenny’s plight, this is undone when we see what he has become. Despite well-documented gender victimization, we are left with the image of him as the ultimate victimizer. While the last scene shows the train moving along carrying the survivors to safety, Kenny is floating face-down in the water of a rushing stream. And unlike the other victims, who may garner sympathy, Kenny may well be seen as getting just what he deserved, not unlike real-life victims of transphobic violence. While temporarily stopped, the re-engorged mobile phallus continues on its interminable way.

Sleepaway Camp: See What Monstrosity a Queer Family Produces

Sleepaway Camp (1983) was written and directed by Robert Hiltzik. It begins with peaceful, bucolic scenes of Camp Arawak. The opening scene focuses on a family consisting of a father, his son and daughter, swimming in the lake enjoying the warm summer weather. In addition, there is a shot of a man and a woman riding in a boat, pulling a water-skier behind them. Craig is handling the boat just fine, but soon his girlfriend Mary-Anne asks if she can take the wheel. He initially resists but soon gives in as she flirts with him to get her way. A man onshore yells to the family in the water to come in soon for a visit from their Aunt Martha. However, it is not to be. Mary-Anne evidently loses control and crashes the boat into the family, killing the father and son.

The film’s next scene takes place eight years later. We are introduced to Aunt Martha, her son Ricky, and Angela, the surviving child from the boat accident, who now lives with Martha. The eccentrically portrayed Aunt Martha speaks in an affected tone...
and tells the children what fun they are going to have that summer at Camp Arawak. Aunt Martha provides the children’s medical paperwork for camp, which she filled out herself rather than have a physician do it. Angela is mute and seems in a constant dazed state, although her cousin Ricky is very exuberant and protective of his cousin.

The remainder of the film is a pretty straightforward slasher film. The first guy to get severely injured is the head chef of the camp, Artie. When the children arrive at the camp, he remarks to his co-workers how much he loves the girls, whom he refers to as “fresh young chickens” and “baldies.” Angela won’t eat the camp food and is brought to meet Artie, who takes her into the walk-in refrigerator and attempts to rape her. She is saved by her cousin Ricky and it is soon Artie’s turn to pay. While Artie is working alone in the camp kitchen, bent over a huge boiling pot of water for corn on the cob, the killer comes and pushes him part way into the pot, causing third degree burns over much of his body. When the dead Artie is brought out on a stretcher, the camp’s owner/director is seen to be interested only in preserving the camp’s reputation. He quickly pays off the kitchen staff with hush money and sweeps the incident under the rug. The kitchen staffers are mostly people of color and are portrayed in a very stereotyped and subservient fashion.

The film is remarkable in how gender-polarized it is. Although it is a co-ed camp, many of the activities are gender-segregated and very gender-normative. A scene of the guys playing baseball is typical, with lots of aggressive behavior, betting, roughhousing, swearing etc. When one teams wins, they tell the others that maybe they should compete against the girls next time. There is also a very heavily heterosexual frame of reference and a “cool kids” versus “geeks” dichotomy in the social hierarchy present at the camp.
When Ricky first arrives, he is immediately told to check out the breasts of a girl named Judy, with whom he had made out in a previous year at camp. There is talk of hanging a girl’s panties on the flagpole. Mozart, the nerdy boy, is frequently terrorized by the other boys. These heterosexual, gender-normative, and frequently sexist shenanigans are the normalized sexual/gender landscape in the film. Importantly, the viewer is made to feel sympathetic toward the victims of these taunts, and in that way room is opened up to feel positively for the misfits and underdogs.

On other hand, as mentioned previously, the line between heterosexuality and homosociality/homoeroticism is often a murky one. Several reviewers of the film commented on what they see as homoerotic subtext. In his review of the film, Scott Weinberg writes: “Yet as bad as most of the acting is, there’s nothing more horrifying than those sickening short-shorts that all the BOY campers are forced to wear…So off-putting are these wardrobe choices that it makes an extended softball sequence look like gay porn” (Weinberg). Reviewer Bill Gibron says this of the film:

*Sleepaway Camp* is unusual in that it contains a great deal of homoerotic overtones (or ‘foreshadowing’ as the director himself refers to it). From the numerous shots of shirtless men in shorts that would make Brazilians embarrassed, to the overt sluttiness of the girls, Hiltzik is throwing the entire slasher genre into an uproar (Gibron).

I think that, in addition to the “short shorts” there is shock in the final scene, which reveals a penis, a rarity in slasher films. There is also male nudity with a shot of the guys going skinny dipping in an earlier cut of the film. Hiltzik’s “foreshadowing” helps to construct the everyday scenes of gender’s role in socializing as important to the overall
filmic narrative and plot twist finale. The tight shots of males wearing “package-revealing” clothing also has the function of reifying the cultural ideology that equates sexed embodiment with gender expression. The film seems to be stating that it is not enough to assume the presence of their penises: direct evidence must be given. In this way, the film not only shows evidence of Hiltzik’s “foreshadowing,” it also alerts viewers that their assumptions of body morphology based on outward appearance are not always correct. This ambivalence towards gender makes the film difficult to nail down politically, but it makes it more interesting and intriguing to analyze.

Throughout the film, Angela does not meet the standards of this teen gendered socializing and is punished for it by the meaner kids at the camp. For one, she barely speaks. For another, she does not go swimming or take part in most of the camp’s activities or sports. She is especially mocked by the camp’s “mean girls,” Judy and Meg. At one point, Meg becomes enraged because Angela will not speak. She starts to shake her and calls her a bitch. At another point, she literally picks Angela up and throws her in the lake. When Ricky sees what is happening, he tries to aid her, only to be stopped by Mel, the older camp director. In a girls’ cabin, Angela is verbally attacked by Judy, who is the “developed” girl at camp. She asks Angela why she does not take a shower. She then asks her if she is “queer,” or if she has not developed hair “down there,” or reached puberty. She tells Angela that she is a “real carpenter’s dream” because she is flat as a board and needs a screw. Angela fails the test of heterosexual, gender-normativity and is publicly condemned.26

Ironically, though cast as a misfit, a boy, Paul, finds her attractive and asks her on a date. Although they kiss, Angela refuses to go any further. When intimacy seems
palpable, the music in the film turns extremely dramatic and ominous. It becomes increasingly evident that there is something “different” about Angela, additional foreshadowing of the homosexuality that haunts the film’s seemingly normative gender landscape. Meanwhile, more campers are being killed, including a boy who goes skinny dipping and is found the next morning with water-snakes coming out of his mouth and a guy who gets locked in a bathroom stall while the killer skillfully throw a hornet’s nest into it.

When Angela and Paul are involved in a full-on make-out scene on the beach, Angela becomes noticeably uncomfortable. In one of the film’s most telling scenes, the scene switches to a different time and place. The two men featured during the film’s beginning are shown in bed together caressing each other in a loving and sexual manner. Angela and her brother are shown in the crack of the door watching them and giggling silently. The next scene is bizarre, and it is of the two siblings, boy and girl, spinning around on a bed looking intently at each other and pointing at one another.

Inexplicably, Meg comes on sexually to Mel, and promises to meet him for a rendezvous later that night. When she goes to take a shower, someone slashes her with a huge knife. Judy is soon killed off as well. The killer covers her head with a pillow and shoves a hot curling iron into her vagina.

Ultimately, the counselors discover that Angela is actually male. In a greatly disturbing scene, they find Angela on the beach with her boyfriend’s decapitated head in her lap, and when she stands, her male genitalia is revealed. This is particularly significant given how rare full-frontal male nudity is in mainstream cinema. Obviously, the writer/director Robert Hiltzik wanted to truly create a shock for viewing audiences,
similar to the penile displaying of the character Dil in Neil Jordan’s 1992 film *The Crying Game*. Much has been made of this cult classic finale by audiences and critics alike. While Weinberg writes that the “final shot will most likely remain permanently etched in your movie memory bank,” Gibron notes that “the ending is still damn effective and well worth experiencing by even the most jaded slaughter fan.” Nick Schager’s review of the movie on the Website Lessons of Darkness is even more instructive:

Hiltzik’s original is still the finest *Sleepaway Camp*, if only because of its memorable final shot, a hilarious, repulsive—and, for those with same-sex inclinations, potentially offensive—image of androgynous turmoil that remains burned in one’s mind long after the derivative plot has faded from memory (Schager).

The power of the film’s final shot cannot be overestimated. As the reviewers note, it sears into the viewer’s memory with a fierceness seldom duplicated on the big screen. Angela, for better or for worse, becomes an unforgettable character in the history not only of slasher movies, but a cinematic cult classic in her own right.

Before ending, the film switches to a flashback with Aunt Martha. It turns out it was the boy who survived the accident—not the daughter—and Aunt Martha had decided to raise him not as Peter but as a girl named after his dead sister Angela. She presents him with a dress and says that she has always wanted a girl, since she already has her son Ricky. Back in the present, the camp counselor exclaims: "How can it be? My God, she's a boy!" Her gender “deviance” is highlighted by Angela growling like an animal/monster. In addition, the screen turns green and eventually freezes for maximum dramatic effect. The credits then roll.27
Sleepaway Camp is a great example of a film that combines multiple forms of gender oppression to deliver its chilling message. Right from the beginning, the horrible accident is caused by a teenage girl, portrayed in a silly, distracted and overly flirtatious manner, who takes the wheel from her presumably more competent boyfriend. The pedophilic cook is the first victim, since his “deviance” is obvious and universally reviled. The girls are mostly portrayed as the classic queen bees and mean girls, who torment Angela and anyone who is different. They display constant jealousy and fight to attract the attention of their male peers. The murders of the girls are linked to sexuality. Gloria Cowan and Margaret O’Brien do a content analysis of 56 slasher films (including Sleepaway Camp) to examine the gendered constructions and survivor traits of characters in these filmic texts. They write: “Surviving as a female slasher victim was strongly associated with the relative absence of sexual behavior…In slasher films, the message appears to be that sexual women get killed and only the pure women survive” (194-195).

When Meg asks Mel out to dinner, she is cast as making herself sexually available to an older man. Soon after their tryst is set, Meg is viciously murdered while in the shower: nude and vulnerable. Judy is punished for her overall meanness but also for kissing Angela’s male suitor in the woods. That she is killed by having a hot curling iron shoved up her vagina is not accidental. For her flirtations with boys, for being “developed,” and for kissing another girl’s boyfriend, the bodily site of her murder is specifically tied to her femaleness and sexuality. This blatant misogyny is over-the-top and parodic in its representation. Is Hiltzik hinting that there is more than meets the eye in the film?
For example, the sadism and cruelty that Angela experiences certainly does not endear the audience to the alpha males and mean girls on screen who inflict it upon her. Cowan and O’Brien write: “the outstanding features of male non-survivors were negative behavior and attitudes, with more obvious character flaws—cynical, using obscenities, behaving in illegal and counter-normative ways, and in comparison to female non-survivors, egotistical and dictatorial” (195) If anything, the audience is made to sympathize with Angela and with those who defend her, such as Ricky. There is an implicit critique of the behavior towards their fellow camper as Angela endures one indignity after another. The highly stratified world of youth culture is put on brazen display, with its features (shallowness, popularity, and verbal abuse) revealed to the discerning viewer. But, as in all the films discussed in this chapter, victim becomes victimizer after enduring such mistreatments.

In addition to the misogynistic incidents, the film includes heterosexism and homophobia. Halfway along, we learn that the relationship between the dad and his male friend at the film’s beginning was actually a gay male romantic partnership. There is a particularly eerie and bizarre scene of the two men in bed, while the children watch and giggle from the doorway, coupled with the scene of the two kids staring and pointing at each other. In his review of the film, Ed Gonzalez believes that the “’50s PSA spectacle of queer petting” leads to the film suggesting that the two siblings commit incest with each other. In the spinning bed, the two kids are sitting in the bed face to face with a blanket over their laps. The boy points to the girl and inches ever closer to her. The scene is ambiguous about an occurrence of incest, but it certainly is a possible reading. At any rate, the subtext of the film is clear. Peter/Angela has been corrupted by the virus
of gender/sexual deviance and this leads to mistreatment and ultimately sociopathic behavior. Her gay fathers and proximity to homosexuality “contaminated” her being. Firstly, the fact that she had two dads put her in the midst of gender confusion. Under patriarchy, gender and sexual roles are always supposed to be completely clear and rigid. The threat to the normalcy of the nuclear, heterosexual family deals Peter/Angela a devastating blow, from which she is never to recover. When she looks into the eyes of her sibling, she is not able to properly differentiate boy from girl. This gender confusion is cast as dangerous, insidious and threatening.28 In his review of the film, Ed Gonzalez writes:

How does one explain the lascivious nature of the film’s murders? This isn’t just some person being driven over the edge by rampant bullying—it’s a mathematical equation being solved after eight long years (or 90 minutes). Gay Dad + Incest + Foster Mom (AKA Refugee from Andy Warhol’s Factory) = I’m Going To Put A Curling Iron In Your Vagina. Gonzalez’s humorous but cogent analysis demonstrates that the film, despite engaging with homoerotic undertones and sexual ambiguity, ultimately betrays its own subversive potentiality.

Given the year of this film’s release, 1983, in the midst of the first Ronald Reagan administration and the early years of the AIDS epidemic, the blatant homophobia is not entirely surprising. Having queer parents was thought to lead to exactly the type of problems that later befell Angela: an identity crisis of gender confusion. Further, the ideology serves a didactic lesson about sexual morality and the dangers of sexual deviation for adolescents. As Cowan and O’Brien write:
The message that the good woman is asexual and the bad (and therefore dead) woman is sexual, however, may be almost as pernicious as the message conveyed in pornography that violence can be fun for women. Given the high level exposure of young people to this message—those who are in sexually formative years, coupled with the sex equals death message surrounding AIDS, this message is particularly problematic. Slasher films reinforce the ideas that female sexuality is costly, at least for females. (195)

This “costly” nature of sexuality is also echoed by Gonzalez: “In many ways, ‘80s horror films with cautionary slants can be seen as reactions to frank and open expressions of sexual behavior throughout the ‘70s. If sex was ‘free’ a decade earlier, now it came with a price” (Gonzalez). In this way, *Sleepaway Camp* functions as a cultural text to reinforce a cautionary tale about the costly price of sexuality if it deviates too much from the scripts of heterosexual patriarchy. Participating in the social ritual of the cinematic viewing, adolescents are instructed in possible repercussions for breaking the molds of gender and sexual propriety.

The homophobia and misogyny of the film are capped off by the twist ending. Angela, as we discovered, is not a female at all. She is Peter, whom an eccentric Aunt has re-gendered as a girl. For all the problems raised by homophobia and misogyny in the film, they pale in comparison to the ultimate transphobia. For a male person to be seen living and being raised as a girl is literally embodying the ultimate in horror and terror: “My God, she’s a boy!” The representation of Angela at the end is not of a human one but of a beastly one—exactly embodying the Transgender Monster. She lives in the
realm of human experience and understanding and is depicted as a ghastly animal-like entity; precisely because to no longer be clearly male or female renders one as subhuman: monstrous and animalistic. The singularity of this moment of her nude body coming into view is incredibly significant. Her already queer-coded body finally becomes transparent in this notorious moment of ocular consumption. The utterance: “Oh my god, she’s a boy!” speaks to her liminal status: a she-boy. The flashbacks are gay male parents seen caressing in bed, a disturbed aunt who feminizes a male child for her own capricious reasons, and a female-appearing biological male who has been kissing a boy. The “she-boy” is brought into view for ghastly shock purposes. But s/he does not exist only for shock purposes or for a twist ending. S/he also is the very center of the sex/gender anxieties and terrors, the embodiment of fears and desires combined. On the one hand, viewers root for her because she has been so cruelly victimized by her peers. There is a sense of satisfaction in seeing her sadistic campmates experience a tragic downfall. On the other hand, this sense of sympathy is short-lived. Angela comes to represent the Transgender Monster, and the viewer’s sympathy may quickly turn to animosity and disgust.

One of the difficult truths I must acknowledge as a trans-feminist viewer and critic is my own ambivalent relationship to this film as a spectator. Like many other films, the movie problematically intertwines criminality and gender-variance, leaving viewers with a transphobic aftertaste in their mouth. But unlike most (but not all) of the other films featuring trans killers, this trans killer lives at the end! Does Angela, so tormented by gender bullies and their abuses, constitute the “final girl”? To what extent does our indignation at her mistreatment mitigate our discovery of her as the killer? Is
there a reading of the Transgender Monster that is more potentially progressive for transgender spectators? How does the final “unveiling” of her transsexed body interface with her filmic status as victim/victimizer? The film’s extremely abrupt ending makes answering the previous questions difficult, if not impossible. But the very lack of “closure” which seems to typify the other films lends this movie possibilities for interpretation that resists hegemony in subtle ways. I will explore the subversive potentialities of trans monsters in the lives of trans people more at the chapter’s conclusion. Before that, we will turn to an examination of our third and final film.

**Cherry Falls: Virginity, Rape Trauma and Vicarious Rage**

*Cherry Falls*, (2000) was directed by Geoffrey Wright. It tells the story of a teenager named Jody Marken. The film begins with bucolic scenes of this small town, including its titular waterfalls, and then switches to a scene of a couple, Rod and Stacey, making out in a car. Rod is putting pressure on Stacey to have sex, which she resists. Soon their car is emblazoned with light from another car. A stranger with long black hair streaked with white, and wearing all-black clothing, approaches. Soon both Rod and Stacey are viciously murdered by this stranger, slashed with a knife. The killer slams Stacey up against a tree and acts in an erotic manner towards her, even kissing her, before killing her.

In this opening scene, the basic premise of the film is set up. Cherry Falls is an apt name for the town, since the plot of the movie, in many ways, revolves around women losing their virginity, i.e. losing one’s “cherry.” The second scene switches to another couple in a car, the protagonist of the film Jody Marken and her boyfriend Kenny. She, too, is being pressured to have sex. They argue and essentially break up,
and Kenny drives her home. Jody goes to her room to discover her father waiting for her. He is angry that she is late and we also discover that he, Brent Markham, is the town sheriff. He is soon called out to investigate the crime scene of the film’s first double murder.

Jody goes to school the next day and is asked by her friend Timmy for information on the murders. Timmy writes for the school paper and he hopes that Jody’s status as daughter of the sheriff will get him some coveted information. The school is shocked by the murders, and Sheriff Marken meets with Mr. Tom Sisler, the school principal. In Mr. Leonard Marliston’s English class, students attempt to talk about the murder, but wind up arguing. In the school lunch room, a couple verbally fight loudly because the male in the couple, Dylan, has been spreading false rumors about his girlfriend, Annette, telling people that she “gave him a hummer.” Annette becomes the next victim. Alone at home, she answers a knock at the door but does not open it. The person identifies herself as Loralee Sherman and asks to leave a note for Annette’s parents. When Annette cracks open the door to take the note, Loralee is able to get in and smacks Annette’s head between the door and the jamb before killing her and stringing her up from the living room ceiling.

At this point, Sheriff Marken figures out that the killer is targeting virgins because he is leaving the word “Virgin” carved into their flesh as her calling card. He calls for a town meeting where he announces his findings to the assembled parents, who quickly worry that their daughters are going to start having sex to avoid the wrath of the killer’s obsession with virgins. Timmy and Jody spy on the meeting to learn what the sheriff has to say. However, the killer is in the building and Timmy, now separated from Jody, soon
pays with his life for his student journalist’s nosiness, becoming the killer’s next victim. Timmy has borrowed Jody’s cell phone and when she attempts to find him to retrieve it, she hears it ringing in a locker. When the locker is opened, Timmy’s body falls out and Jody has a close call with the killer herself before her father finds her in the building.

After the attack, Jody goes to the police station with her father to work with an artist to create a composite sketch of the killer. When the sketch is finished, someone comments that it looks like Loralee Sherman, who had left town 25 years earlier and moved to West Virginia. In a later scene, Jody is at the library looking at newspaper microfiches for information about the Sherman woman. Her mother had denied knowing who Loralee was, but at the library, Jody demands to know; her mother finally relents, and tells Jody the whole story. Loralee was a student at the Cherry Falls high school 25 years ago. During her senior year, she was raped by four men, whose identities are well known. While two of the men had left town, two had stayed. Of the two who stayed, one is the principal, Tom Sisler and the other is Jody’s own father, Brent, the sheriff. In the meantime, while Jody is at the library, many of the other students are at an unchaperoned house party and having sex in an earnest attempt to “de-virginize” themselves.

Jody is shocked by the news about her father and goes to talk to her favorite teacher, Mr. Marliston. She finds him on his porch with a heavy trunk. It turns out that her father is bound and duct-taped inside the trunk. Marliston takes Jody hostage and we learn that he is the killer. He dresses in drag, complete with wig, make-up, and a black leather coat and skirt. He forces Jody and her father down to his basement, which includes a make-up area for his transformation into the female killer; the basement is also equipped with a wall displaying sharp and terrifying weapons and torture devices. He
demands that Marken tell his daughter exactly what he did to Loralee Sherman. He resists but finally relates the following:

There were four of us. We were drunk. About ready to graduate from high school. We were going to a party to celebrate the end of our senior year. Then we saw a car broke down on the side of the road. It was Loralee. We all knew her from school. She was a weird kid. Kind of pretty in a way I guess. I was in really bad shape. Tom told her to get in his car but she wouldn’t do it so they started teasing her and laughing at her and then she got mad. She called Tom a homo and then she just took off and they took off right after her. That’s when things got crazy. They poured booze down her throat and I guess what happened…well you know what happened. First Tom, then Harry, then Jim, then they came looking for me and they grabbed me. They threw me on top of her but I knew what I was doing…

Next we learn the most shocking secret of all. As Leonard transforms himself into a woman, he tells Sheriff Marken and Jody that after the rape Loralee went crazy. It was especially difficult because she had been secretly in love with Brent for some time. That is why she had initially approached the men, due to her powerful love for Brent. Leonard said it was exceedingly hard to look like the person that your mother simultaneously loved and hated most in the world, and that she reminded him, Leonard, of that fact every minute while he was growing up. There is a brief flashback of Loralee abusing a young child; Loralee had become pregnant from the rape, and Leonard is the resulting child. Now, Leonard dresses up as Loralee to avenge what happened to her all
those years ago. Leonard is deeply angry that two of the rapists have become pillars of
the community and never faced justice for what they did to his mother.

Jody’s life is saved when Kenny figures out that she has gone to Mr. Marliston’s
house. He discovers Marliston partially in drag and manages to get Jody free. They go
to the house party to tell the partygoers, most of whom are having sex, that Mr. Marliston
is the killer. Marliston follows them there and yells “class dismissed” before beginning
to wildly hack away at students unfortunate enough to be within his reach. Jody finally
pushes him off the second story balcony and he falls, impaled on a piece of wood. When
a student attempts to pull the wig off of him, he grabs at the student but is shot to death
by the sheriff’s deputy. The last scene is a shot of the falls, which have mysteriously
turned cherry red.

As mentioned earlier, it is almost a stock feature of horror films to focus on
sexually-assertive young women being murdered for their transgression away from
virginal femininity. This film twists that stock feature in a different way. In a move
typified by an increasingly self-referential and ironic genre, this horror movie makes the
killer interested in virgins. I believe this to be an outgrowth of postmodernism.31 In the
“new” slasher films exemplified by Scream (1996) and I Know What You Did Last
Summer (1997), humor, self-referentiality and new twists abound. Given several decades
of stock slasher movies, particularly those featuring teenagers, it became necessary for
producers to spice things up in new ways. Since the Cherry Falls killer was interested in
virgins, the film’s teenagers had to engage in a sexual frenzy to escape with their lives.
Yet, by the film’s end, the “final girl,” Jody Marken, is still a virgin. It is almost as if the
truly “good” girls will work to maintain their virginity even in the face of potential death.
Although the film received mixed reviews overall, reviewers certainly noticed the fresh aspects of the film and appreciated the twists from the genre’s stock conventions. For instance, Dustin Putman writes: “Stylish, suspenseful and unusually intelligent for a genre movie, Cherry Falls is an excellent example of how to make a horror movie right.” In her review, Cheryl DeWolfe states that “Cherry Falls is written for people who prefer their sex and violence with a side order of intelligence” while Derek Elley writes, “From its punning title to its playfulness with genre norms, the script by Ken Selden is clearly trying to do something different with the form, while still delivering the goods at a visceral level.” Reviewers frequently remarked upon the film’s intelligence, style, innovation and wit. However, others noted that the film could not decide if it wanted to be a truly terrifying slasher or a black comedy. “Post-Scream, you can’t just offer horror, it has to be knowing or funny. Cherry Falls can’t handle the juggle and instead it becomes a balance between gory and very silly” (Gallaher). Despite this challenge, the film’s reversal of generic convention lifts the film into an unusual realm, proffering the reversal of the morality tales of horny and sexually adventurous young women getting killed for their transgression. Still, the potential subversion of this motif is offset by the sadly typical appearance of the cross-dressed killer.

As with the other films analyzed in this chapter, the killer’s transgenderism is not only a sensationalistic plot device, but also serves to associate gender transgression with sociopathic behavior. “The notion of a killer propelled by psychosexual fury, more particularly a male in gender distress, has proved a durable one, and the progeny of Norman Bates stalk the genre up to the present day” (Clover 27). Leonard Marliston, one of Norman Bates’s progeny, also dresses up like his mother. The particular dime store
psychoanalysis discussed earlier has had a remarkably enduring legacy, from the 1950s to the present, warning society of the ramifications of moms who refuse to cut the apron strings and boys who identify too strongly with the maternal figure. Marliston is such a prominent threat “not simply because he is a homicidal maniac, but because his mother-identified killing persona is represented in transgender terms. Each is a metaphor for the other, and both destabilize the law” (John Phillips 114). While Marliston’s outsider status earns him death, Jody’s conformance to patriarchal gender and feminine, virginal purity allow her to survive.

Who the killer is, and his motivation for killing, are vitally important pieces of information to ascertain within the horror/slasher film genre. The motivation for killing is what many viewers want to know, perhaps as much as or even more than the very identity of the killer. In this film, the killer has been shaped by his environment and by his family. The killer’s mother was already an “other” and referred to as “weird” by alpha male Brent Marken. The dark clothes and the “goth” strip of white in her hair are used in the film to signify her failure to conform to the mainstream standards of high school culture. Already outcast, the horrific rape she endures at the hands of the four popular jocks is the proverbial nail in the coffin. Viewers most likely feel a certain level of fear and sympathy when confronting the character of Loralee. Certainly, viewers sympathize with the anguish of her rape and her inability to receive justice in the case. However, as is the case with the other films in this chapter, her mistreatment causes her to go insane, an insanity she then passes on to her unborn son. While the poor treatment may elicit sympathy, it wanes when the person is then driven to the depths of madness
and violent, psychotic behavior. As John Phillips writes, the film also engages with psychoanalytic tropes.

In the kind of twist which has also become something of a cliché in the genre, the killer turns out to be the son of the sheriff, who is destined to become one of his victims: in a variation on the Oedipal theme, the mother-identified Marliston therefore kills his own father (109).

Can we read this to be a critique of patriarchy or a reification of it? Like the other films discussed, Cherry Falls has a highly complex and ambivalent relationship to gender conventions and sexual practices.

It appears, though, that deviation (“weird”, “goth”) ultimately is not valorized. It is seen as the precursor of insanity and sociopathic behavior. Why does Marliston cross-dress in this film and what does it reveal about hegemonic constructions of gender and sexuality? Interestingly, Marliston’s cross-dressing is never thoroughly explained. For instance, when Kenny comes to the door and sees Marliston half in drag, he asks him why he is wearing lipstick. Marliston replies that it makes him look pretty. However, one can infer that it was his treatment at the hands of his mother that made him over-identify with her. Like the seminal figure of Norman Bates in Psycho, Leonard has presumably been “dominated” by a rage-filled, abusive matriarch. While this has undoubtedly created hostility for her, it paradoxically has made him identify with the source of her deep and abiding rage. By “becoming” her through cross-dressing, Leonard is able to channel her rage more directly in pursuit of bloody revenge. Leonard lives vicariously as Loralee and seeks violent revenge on her behalf to obtain justice against the rapists and the town that valorized them.
In a typical caricature, it is obvious that Leonard is also afraid of his own sexuality. At the beginning of the film, he is shown caressing his victim with a knife and kissing her. However, when Jody brazenly flirts with him, he is depicted as being very uncomfortable. While the student-teacher sex taboo may account for some of this, I believe that he is “queered” in that he is not quite seen to meet the standards of normative, hetero-masculinity demanded under patriarchy. Perhaps this is done to foreshadow his gender transgression when he cross-dresses. In *Psycho*, the perpetrator kills the very women who sexually arouse him. The sub-text in *Cherry Falls* seems to be that Leonard is unable to deal with his own sexual feelings and so cross-dresses and kills in acts of revenge on his mother’s behalf to quell such desires.

The reason given by the killer himself for his actions is to strike back against a hypocritical world. Enraged that two of the rapists have become upstanding members of the community (principal and sheriff) Leonard seeks to deprive them, as he says, of the “one innocence they have left, their precious virginal children.” As John Phillips writes: “He steals away the community’s innocence, as symbolized by their virginal children, as punishment for their crime of stealing his mother’s innocence. As he murders each victim, he carves the word ‘virgin’ into the thigh—defining the victim’s innocence in the very act of removing it” (109). Audiences, desensitized over the decades by killings of the sexually assertive female, are now treated to the murders of virgins. In exceptions to this, both Sheriff Marken and Principal Sisler are murdered by Leonard, as retribution for their participation in the gang rape. Mr. Sisler has had “virgin not” carved onto his body.

The social emphasis on gender normativity and the heterosexual imperative are vitally important. They serve as a backdrop for the transgressive elements, which also
happen to include sociopathic behavior. It is no accident that one of the most violent and bloody scenes in the film involves Marliston randomly killing high school kids at the “sex” party where they are in the process of de-virginizing” themselves in order to avoid the very wrath he is now inflicting. Marliston is symbolically killing off the gender and sexual normativity that he has never been allowed to access. The “popular” kids having heterosexual sex are his enemies. His cross-dressing and his discomfort with heterosexual advances are further proof of his self-perceived status as a “failed” masculine subject. This gender distress and this over-identification with his mother force him to kill that which he can never possess or never become. Further, through his desire to revenge the source of his mother’s anguish, he is, in a sense, striking back against patriarchy. Through his rage about his mother’s rape, he is delivering a hit towards masculinist violence, rather than ignoring it or actively condoning it. Sadly, at the film’s end, although Sheriff Marken has been killed, his wife and daughter become the patriarchal stand-ins. When questioned by the police about what happened, they do not reveal the truth about the rape but rather continue the cover-up. Therefore, the rape is actually framed as a lesser crime, one that is forgiven by the characters who are truly innocent. Leonard’s transgressions, however, are beyond redemption. As we saw at the end of *Terror Train*, the hegemonic social order is restored. As John Phillips writes, we are watching a morality tale, in which disobedience to the Father’s law is ultimately punished. This law and the symbolic order which it defends promote fixity and restraint, and abhor lack of control and instability in all things, especially in sexual relations and gender positions (111).
While a period of gender terror has been temporarily unleashed, the ultimate source of that pronominal anxiety, the cross-dressed killer, has been destroyed. Given the largely destructive traits of the Transgender Monster in these films, are there possibilities for more subversive identifications with monstrosity, particularly for trans viewers?  

**Trans Monsters Raging Against the System?**

While researching the film *Sleepaway Camp*, I discovered a trans woman who had a blog about trans issues in media. One entry discussed the film and the ambivalence she has as a trans-identified spectator:

> Some folks I know, including transgender folks, have stated that this movie [*Sleepaway Camp*] does not offend them because it seems empowering to trans folks. “Watch out for the scary tranny! If you treat her bad she’ll kill you!” In some ways, I can understand the viewpoint that it might be empowering… (Sabrina M.)

While Sabrina M. then goes on to discuss how the film upset her for its gimmicky use of transgenderism and its highly problematic sensationalism, the initial question deserves a bit more analysis. Is it possible to see manifestations of trans monstrosity in potentially empowering terms? Certainly, the growing transgender literature seems to construct a place for visions of monstrosity that *are not* wholly negative. In fact, some writers celebrate the possibilities opened up by transgender monsters, and their liberating impact on trans people and the society in which they live. Writer Boots Potential chronicles a growing identification with monstrosity that parallels his trans identity:

> There has always been something compelling to me about a living thing that can freak the shit out of someone just by merit of their very existence
in the world. Especially when, in doing so, it forces us to question the boundaries of the things we once thought were neat, well-defined and impermeable… There is something very promising about a monster culture that might revel in itself, that might deliberately position itself as monstrous in the sense that it deviates, threatens and challenges (33-34).

The call for a “monster culture” that Potential makes is intriguing for the way it takes an entity so infused by dominant culture with scorn, fear and hostility and resurrects it as a subversive, transgressive and liberatory figure. Like the reclamation of the word “queer” by members of the LGBT community, the trans community could potentially reclaim monstrosity, or elements of it, in ways that strip it of its ability to pejoratively define, frame and limit gender-variant people. Susan Stryker discusses this possibility in her brilliant essay about trans monstrosity:

I want to lay claim to the dark power of my monstrous identity without using it as a weapon against others or being wounded by it myself. I will say this as bluntly as I know how: I am a transsexual, and therefore I am a monster…words like ‘creature,’ ‘monster,’ and ‘unnatural’ need to be reclaimed by the transgendered. By embracing and accepting them, even piling them on top of another, we may dispel their ability to harm us. (246)

Part of my own fascination with this springs from my own autobiography. As a genderqueer, non-passing transgender woman, I am amazed at the level of hostility/fascination I often receive in public areas like shopping malls. (Stares, points, whispers, and occasionally direct epithets.) What is the power that I have, the magnetic pull I possess, that seems to threaten so many people, complete strangers, on a
visceral level? As Potential asks, how do we “freak the shit out of someone” simply by virtue of disrupting the conventions of the sex-gender system? And more importantly, how can we harness this power in ways which further our community and help to transform the culture into a heightened consciousness of gender and sexuality?

Sandy Stone is another trans theorist who has explicated her thoughts on the productive power of the monstrous for queer people in the following interview:

The thing that first intrigued me about Donna Haraway’s use of the term “monster” was her etymology of it, leading back to “monstrance,” meaning to show, to show forth. That, for me, is the most useful aspect of the idea of the monstrous. Because to show forth does not mean necessarily to frighten; it may mean to inspire awe, and it is from a sense of awe that we grow, not necessarily from a sense of fear. Also, it’s the monstrous in our culture that represents a tremendous wellspring of power—power for change (Fruth and Guilfoyle 44).

Each of the three trans writers advocate a notion of trans monstrosity, but each has their own caveats. Potential writes: “The monster identity, however, is an imperfect model. I do not necessarily want to associate myself with viciousness, irrational violence, and pathological insanity” (34). Stryker does not want to use monstrosity as a “weapon against others” or be wounded by it herself.” Stone wants to stress the monster as not that which inspires terror so much as that which engenders awe and emancipatory growth and transformation. Thus, the project of monster reclamation is a complex one, but one which holds intriguing possibilities for change. Sadly, the films of the dominant culture examined here are unlikely to inspire such reinterpreted and revised notions of
the Transgender Monster. But the future may produce much more imaginative
approaches to transgender monstrosity and their potential to jolt the status quo.

Concluding Thoughts

In each of these films, I am interested not only in the depiction of the Transgender
Monster, but also in the dominant sex-gender-sexuality categorizations and the ways in
which these categorizations operate in the lives of “normal” men and women. It is
important to uncover what those ideologies are. These ideologies often reveal the ways
in which patriarchal values continue to be put forward into circulation. Despite decades
of feminist, queer and trans social movements, reactionary ideologies continue to be
pumped out by filmmakers in service of masculinist, heterosexist and gender-normative
agendas. As demonstrated in Terror Train, the theme of emasculation is a recurring one.
Traditional, heterosexual manhood (and to a lesser extent, womanhood) is under both
literal and metaphorical attack. That attack causes men to go bad, and that “going bad” is
characterized by becoming woman-like through cross-dressing and sex-changing
procedures.

In these films, the Transgender Monster does not emerge from a vacuum. S/he is
driven into insanity and brutal violence through life experiences and circumstances.
These events are centered around societal constructions of gender and sexuality. In
particular, s/he is driven mad because of gender sadism, abuse and sexual terror. These
triggers are a virtual compendium of dime-store psychoanalyses: overbearing and abusive
mothers, sadistic practical jokes aimed at thwarting the loss of virginity, gay male fathers,
eccentric aunts imposing gender confusion, and cheating, lesbian, sex-worker ex-
girlfriends, as in the straight-to-video movie TransAmerican Killer. While the journey
often triggers sympathy from audiences, the end result does not. From victim to victimizer, the killer is driven insane by gender circumstances that chip away at the armor of hegemonic codes of sex, gender and sexuality in U.S. culture, and what epitomizes this insanity are the ultimate taboos: cross-dressing and sex-changing. Unable to function in the world as “normal” men, these individuals must become the “other” in order to survive. For in such a gender binary society as ours, what other options are there?

To be sure, depictions of the Transgender Monster link criminal violence, particularly serial killing, with gender transgression. In a society which is as transphobic as ours, this raises serious concerns. While these films do not create transphobia out of thin air, they do reflect and possibly perpetuate greater fear of gender and sexual difference.

In the engaging essay “Of Lady Killers and ‘Men Dressed as Women’: Soap Opera, Scapegoats and the Mexico City Police Department,” author Vek Lewis examines the representation of transgender people in a popular Mexican telenovela (La madastra) and its real world consequences. In particular, Lewis examines how the telenovela’s depiction of a much despised killer as transgender informed public opinion of transpeople, and the actions of the Mexico City Police Department in their efforts to find a serial killer dubbed mataviejitas, or “the old-lady killer.” While avoiding simplistic and over-inflated claims about the relationship between media and society, Vek nonetheless asserts that the media has a powerful effect on society and helps to shape its ideologies towards minority groups. Vek concludes the essay with the following:

As in many other countries in which vast commercial media environments obtain, in Mexico, where ‘real life’ is subject to mediatic (re)construction
and the practices of framing that life are so suffused with the codes of melodrama and *nota roja* journalism, the public abuse of *travestis* as the targets of blame and police fury offers a vivid instance of the ways in which representations can insinuate themselves socially, organise the imaginary and produce real, lived effects. And if the experience of contemporary urban life in Latin America is increasingly scripted by the media’s use of fear’s vocabulary, a phobic lexicography which separates the (sexually) normative from the ‘aberrant,’ wherein *travestis* become the usual suspects, it is unsurprising that Demetrio the killer cross-dresser gains status as a master text for expressing fear of the other. That other here—the duplicitous and murderous *travesti*, ever unreal—emerges at the confluence of pre-established mental models and interpretative codes, in an informational landscape haunted by narratives where strangeness and difference become the embodiments of risk and violence, stalking the city dweller with half-imagined and syndicated nightmares in constant superimposition. (25)

Communications scholars and social scientists have wrestled with the issue of media affects for decades. Despite numerous research studies, there remains no hard and fast data about the impact of media on society, e.g. do images of violence produce a more violent populace? Does pornography desensitize men to violence against women and encourage the committal of sexual assault and violence against women? I certainly make no claim in this chapter that exposure to images of the Transgender Monster will
encourage a young, straight man to go out and beat up a transsexual person or participate in a hate crime against a queer or gender-variant member of society. Obviously, the connection between image and societal action, much less image and ideology, is neither straight-forward nor predictable. However, I do contend, following Lewis, that images congeal over time and take on the mode of “master texts” which function to improperly inform humans about diversity in the social world. Images of the Transgender Monster emerge “at the confluence of pre-established mental models and interpretative codes, in an informational landscape haunted by narratives where strangeness and difference become the embodiments of risk and violence.”

On the other hand, the representation of the Transgender Monster and hir victims help to hold a mirror to society and reveal the cluster of projected fears, terrors and anxieties of dominant, normative society. The Transgender Monster is a sexual boogey-wo/man, a flashpoint for diverse anxieties about masculinity, femininity and heterosexuality in late capitalist culture. Further, as discussed, the Transgender Monster, with pivotal revisions, can constitute an exciting discursive terrain for trans people to inhabit hybridity, difference and unnaturalness with agentic pleasure and pride. While the Transgender Monster reveals little about flesh-and-blood trans people, it reveals an enormous amount about the fragile psyche of gender-normative, heterosexual men. It reveals that in order for patriarchy to function, the true villains must often be rendered invisible and the blame shifted to a powerless group. In the terrifying, slashing hand of the “she-male psycho”, we see a blatant portrayal of scapegoating, of reality reversal and the horror and carnage of this gender war.
CHAPTER FOUR ENDNOTES


2 There is an interesting intersection between gender and size. Fat males are feminized for several reasons. Firstly, weight gain tends to create more curves and rolls on a body and increased fat in places like the hips, butt and chest ("man boobs"). Many people read these fatty deposits as making the body more feminine. It stands in stark contrast to the "hard-bodied," lean and muscular body-type of the hyper-masculine subject in American media. In addition, fatness in our culture is often associated with a lack of control, particularly an inability to control temptation. While this is chided in people of all genders, males in particular are often criticized for their inability to thoroughly control their bodies, and their assumed lack of interest in physical exercise and athletics. (Many people of size exercise regularly, although this is seldom acknowledged by fatphobic society.) This also dovetails with trans identity. If a person assigned-male-at-birth tried hard enough, they could conquer their trans female identity, i.e. become a straight, gender-normative man, just as they could conquer their feminizing fat and weight gain. The thin-supremacist and patriarchal scripts combine to render Michael’s fat, gender-transgressive corporeality as, in and of itself, monstrous for its inability to conform to masculinist cultural dictates.

3 There is an excellent essay that explores the issue of how Black men are treated as criminals in public spaces by whites. See: “Just Walk on By: A Black Man Ponders His Power to Alter Public Space” by Brent Staples.

4 I am not suggesting that these writers set out to consciously represent all transgender people as murderous psychopaths. It is obviously more complex than that. I do, however, believe that the writers, producers, directors etc. have to be situated within their culture, and that their own social locations matter. There was a reason Philip Bloch wrote Norman Bates as a “transvestite” who took on his mother’s persona when killing. The circulation of misogynistic, homophobic and transphobic discourses undoubtedly affect writers and directors and the books and movies they produce.

5 For more on homophobic bigotry and prejudice during the Cold War era, please see: The *Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* by David K. Johnson and *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* by Robert J. Corber.

6 See Betty Friedan’s classic text of second-wave feminism: *The Feminine Mystique*. In it, Friedan criticizes the narrow roles of housewife and mother offered to women in predominantly white, suburban communities in the 1950s and 1960s U.S. Ironically, Friedan was later criticized for her homophobia when she suggested that the “lavender menace” (“out” lesbians in the women’s liberation movement) was a threat to the success of the overall feminist movement.

7 Apparently the Transgender Monster stereotype as a body possessed by a demon even made it to the ideology of scientists and medical doctors. In a shocking 1977 article, three researchers published an outrageous thesis concerning transsexuality. David Barlow, Gene Abel and Edward Blanchard wrote “Gender Identity Change in a Transsexual: An Exorcism.” The abstract reads as follows: “Gender identity change in a conservatively diagnosed 21-year-old transsexual after faith healing was fortuitously observed, was objectively and independently measured, and is reported. This case, and other recent developments, suggests a reexamination of the possibilities of psychosocial intervention to modify atypical gender behavior.” The article describes the case of a young transgender woman who sees a doctor who supposedly “cures” her through the performance of an exorcism. The article, published in *The Archives of Sexual Behavior*, is disturbing for two reasons. Firstly, it sees being cured of transsexuality as a “fortuitous” event, and secondly, it lends credence to the absurd idea that transgender people are possessed by evil demons. I include discussion of this article here because the notion of the Transgender Monster is not just a popular cultural construction; in this case, trained scientists and researchers even buy into the idea. See: Barlow, David H., Gene G. Abel and Edward B. Blanchard. “Gender Identity Change in a Transsexual: An Exorcism.” *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. Volume 6, Number 5 / September, 1977. P. 387-395. Read it online at: http://ai.eecs.umich.edu/people/conway/TS/Rogue%20Theories/Exorcism/Exorcism%20of%20Transsexualism.html

Obviously, we run into problematic territory here if we take this argument too far. I do not wish to reproduce essentialist arguments about heterosexual men or any other group. While these heterosexual male writers/directors tended to reproduce (perhaps unintentionally) transphobia in their work, there are others who consciously seek to root out or expose such bigotry. In addition, writers’ and directors’ placement in a group harmed by gender and sexual oppression (e.g. women, gays and transpeople) certainly does not guarantee a more “enlightened” or progressive representation. The lineage between a producer’s social location and the image they construct is highly complex. However, I am also not willing to completely let go of it as a viable concern. People’s social locations matter; however, their implications on cultural productions are extremely difficult to predict in any kind of coherent or systematic manner.


Some recent horror films have been termed “torture porn.” Given how long the genre has been around, producers have had to push the envelope further and further to entice jaded viewers who have “seen it all” before. Examples of this sub-genre of horror films include *Hostel* (2005), *Saw* (2004) and *Wolf Creek* (2005). These films are known for their combination of nudity, extended scenes of torture, mutilation and extreme gore.

Gender Identity Disorder (GID) is the diagnosis in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) that effectively works to pathologize transsexuality, as does Transvestic Fetishism. Both of these diagnoses have come under tremendous criticism by trans activists and their allies for perpetuating the false notion that transpeople are mentally ill, deviant and pathological. Advocates are working to have the diagnoses removed from the DSM V, slated for release in 2012, or to have the nomenclature significantly reformed. For an excellent overview of these issues and their relevance for trans community empowerment, please see *Gender Madness* by Kelley Winters.

In addition, psychologists like Dr. Kenneth Zucker from the Center for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) in Toronto attempt to treat gender-variant kids to make them conform more to dominant gender roles. Parents’ concerns that their assigned-male-at-birth child is acting too “feminine” seek outs psychologists like Zucker and Joseph Nicolosi to try to compel their child into compliance with the dictates of gender-normative behavior. For more on this issue, see: “Dr. Kenneth Zucker’s War On Transgenders” at: [http://www.queerty.com/dr-kenneth-zuckers-war-on-transgenders-20090206/](http://www.queerty.com/dr-kenneth-zuckers-war-on-transgenders-20090206/)

The transgender women used in pornography are subject to the same objectification as cisgender women, plus extra. In a vein similar to the added exoticizing attributes that women of color face in pornography, transgender women’s “fully functional” and often large penis serves to exoticize her and render her as
hyper-sexualized. While the transgender woman may be “active” or “passive” sexually, she is contained within a sexual framework that privileges only the pleasure of the presumably heterosexual male audience. In viewing these images, heterosexual men consume “she-male slut” images that position the transgender women in ways that fully resonate with patriarchy. The question then emerges: how does pornography usage frame relationships, particularly intimate and romantic ones, between real-world transwomen and cisgender male porn users?

See, for example, the chapter “Psycho-Trans” (p. 85-114) in Transgender on Screen by John Phillips. Also, see The Silence of the Lambs by Yvonne Tasker and “The Transvestite as Monster: Gender Horror in The Silence of the Lambs and Psycho” by Julie Tharp. Rebecca Bell-Metereau discusses Dressed to Kill in her book Hollywood Androgyny on pages 187-190.

For more info on B-movies, see: Hollywood ‘B’ Movies: A Treasury of Thrills, Spills and Chills by John Reid; The B List: The National Society of Film Critics on the Low-Budget Beauties, Genre-Bending Mavericks, and Cult Classics We Love by David Sterritt and Dr. John C. Anderson; Death on the Cheap: The Lost B Movies of Film Noir by Arthur Lyons; Land of a Thousand Balconies: Discoveries and Confessions of a B-Movie Archaeologist by Jack Stevenson; and B Movies by Don Miller.

The actor who plays Kenny Hampson, Derek MacKinnon, appears in Lois Siegel’s 1993 documentary Lip Gloss. The film chronicles the drag and transsexual community in Montréal, Québec, Canada. MacKinnon draws on his skill as a female impersonator to play the multiple gendered personas of Kenny/The Magician’s Assistant. The film shows MacKinnon performing in drag at nightclubs as well as going shopping with his wife.

I quote from this dialogue because it typifies the jokey, frat-boy atmosphere that permeates the social world on the train. In addition, it both makes a mockery of the female body, and exemplifies male control over the female body, showing it as a space colonized by patriarchal agents.

In his New York Times review of the film Terror Train, John Corry writes: “The intention here was to make a thriller, a suspense movie about some people trapped on a train, waiting for an unknown killer to strike. The problem is that they don't do very much else except wait. Oh, they booze it up, and tramp up and down the corridors of the train, but they don't really do anything. They are props, and you are unlikely to care if one of them gets runs through with a saber or not.” The film almost mirrors the mundane living within patriarchy itself, epitomized and signified by the lifeless forward movement of the train.

By this I mean the fact that women behaving in an overtly sexual manner are usually punished in slasher films for their transgressive behavior. According to patriarchy, single women are supposed to be chaste and virginal in sexual matters. Being aggressively sexual is the province of men, and women who behave in this way are castigated as “sluts.” In slasher movies, it is common to see women who have just had casual sex, or sex outside of marriage, be brutally murdered by the killer. The message is that she “deserved” it because she was sleeping around and not acting like a proper “lady.” By punishing empowered female sexual agents, the films subtly and overtly reinforce the need for women to conform to hegemonic scripts of “proper” erotic behaviors.

Clover states that it is a female who is finally able to survive, because it is she who must go through the most horror and terror. For a male viewer to see a fellow male on screen go through such terror would be overly masochistic. Plus, the male is used to project the female as “victim.” Ironically, the “final girl” escapes extended victimhood to become a survivor and “victor.” For more on Clover’s theories, see: Clover, Carol. Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992.

I find it interesting, and important, how Judy, the developed and heteronormative character, Angela’s female peer, calls out all of Angela’s alleged crimes. That she is possibly not “developed” down there obviously foreshadows Angela’s later revelation as a biological male. But it also throws intersexuality into the mix for the way it casts Angela’s genitalia as potentially ambiguous. In addition, Angela’s “queerness” is literally hailed by Judy, and Angela becomes interpolated as a non-gender-normative subject in the sex-gender binary world of the camp.

According to cinematic lore, the director found a short-statured college guy and had him wear a plaster mask emblazoned with a photograph of Angela’s face. Thus, the penis shown in the scene is “real” and not a prosthetic. For the climactic final scene, a local college student had to shave his body and stand naked on the waterfront wearing a plaster mask of Angela’s face (for the long shot). Apparently, the guy had to get
pretty plastered himself in order to do the scene.” Info from The Flesh Farm website: http://www.thefleshfarm.com/sleepawaycamp/sleepaway1.htm

28 This scene reminds me of the horrible gender experiments that John Money allegedly conducted on David Reimer (then Brenda) and his twin brother, where they purportedly had to take off their clothes and peer at each other’s genitalia as children to properly differentiate male from female and brother from sister in the terms of the sexual binary. This abusive therapy was thought to be useful to reinforce the children’s gender identities. For a full discussion of the John/Joan Case (the story of David Reimer) see: Colapinto, John. As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl. New York: Harper Collins, 2000.


30 A “hummer” is a slang term for oral sex, a synonym for “blow job.”

31 The reason I believe this to be associated with postmodernism has to do with the ways in which a postmodern sensibility thoroughly deconstructs master narratives and generic conventionalities. Thus, slasher movies over the decades had become formulaic and stale due to sheer repetition and audiences had grown too accustomed to the limits of the genre’s predictable filmic maneuvers. This is particularly important for slasher movies because surprise, shock and terror are vital to the genre’s successful execution. Thus, the films became more ironic, playful and self-referential to keep viewers interested, and because the influence of the postmodern society had clearly rubbed off. Stuffed between traditional teen slashers and the emergence of torture porn, these “ironic” horror films filled a void before the next wave of scary movies hit theatres. Side by side with the current torture porn are a slew of horror remakes. In addition to the remake of Halloween mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, films such as Amityville Horror, The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, Friday the 13th, Last House on the Left and many others have been recycled to varying success, popularity and critical reception.

32 These films have no sign of ending. In an earlier draft of this chapter, I included a discussion of a recent film to further catalogue these films’ popularity. I cut it due to length, but its misogyny, homophobia and transphobia are truly repulsive. Switch Killer (AKA TransAmerican Killer) is a 2005 slasher film directed by Mack Hail. It is a very low quality film, closer to a “Z Movie” than a “B-movie.” It is also the most transparent in terms of its misogyny, heterosexism and transphobia. Nonetheless, it is worth discussing to note how twenty-five years later, the same ideologies being transmitted in the early 1980s (which harken back to the late 1950s and early 1960s) are still being produced. In fact, if this film is any barometer, the level of hatred and bigotry is getting increasingly worse. The film follows a woman who leaves her abusive boyfriend to become a stripper and a lesbian. When her male abuser learns of this, he goes through gender transition to try to win her back. He also begins brutally murdering everyone who surrounds her. The gore and graphic violence in the film, combined with lots of gratuitous nudity of the female strippers, make it approach the level of a torture porn or gorno (gore-porno) film. The anti-woman, anti-lesbian, and anti-transgender sentiments that run through the film are extremely disturbing.

CHAPTER FIVE:
TRANSGENDER REVOLUTIONARIES: TRANS POLITICAL AGENCY AND
SOCIAL CHANGE IN A “NEW WAVE” OF DOCUMENTARY FILM

In the 1978 Doris Wishman “shockumentary” *Let Me Die a Woman*, so-called
transsexual expert and physician Dr. Leo Wollman guides the uninitiated through the
wacky world of transsexuality. In several unbelievable scenes, he stands next to both
female-to-male and male-to-female nude transsexuals with a pointer and indicates various
parts of their bodies, including their genitalia. A follow up shows a post-operative close-
up of a trans woman’s genitalia. It is amazing to witness the ways in which these trans
bodies are positioned. They are absolutely objectified by the filmmaker and the
“scientific” and “medical” expert. In essence, they have very little subjectivity or agency
of their own, treated as bodies subject to the medical gaze.

Given the history of transgender subjectivity being subsumed under the auspices
of the legal, medical, surgical, psychological and psychiatric establishment in the U.S.,
this representation is simply a more blatant and in-your-face imaging of how transgender
bodies have historically been displayed, colonized, controlled and objectified. The
history of transgender documentary parallels the history of transgender objectification.
But, in a more hopeful vein, it also inherits the history of transgender emergence and
liberation. For many decades, transgender people (previously labeled transvestites and
transsexuals) were endlessly talked about by those in positions of power. Those in
positions of scientific authority had the cultural capital to determine how trans people
were seen in culture and what hoops they had to jump through to access the services they
needed to survive. Lawyers, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, medical
doctors, plastic surgeons and academics appropriated transgender people to give their own version of our identities, lived experiences and history. In addition to medical, psychological, and legal experts, academicians and researchers in such areas as sociology, anthropology and women’s studies ransacked the literature to prove their own particular theories regarding transsexualism. Cisgender authors, photographers and filmmakers used trans people as subject matter for their art. Often, trans people were studied like a butterfly pinned to a corkboard. Documentary film all too often replicated these ways of looking; gender variant people existed to be looked upon as objects, and typically there were particular emotions that accompanied this mode of looking including pity, fear, loathing, disgust, amusement, misunderstanding and titillation.

I find it, in many ways, more challenging to write about documentary film than about fictional, narrative film. I think this is because as a viewer, and a critic, I come to documentary films with a different set of preconceptions. Documentary, by nature of its existence, has a differential relationship to the “truth” and to “reality” than does fictional, narrative film. As an activist, I have always been highly drawn to documentary film for the ways in which it tends to center on the social, cultural, economic and political issues of our time. Documentary can, in this sense, serve as a rallying point to further grass-roots activism, not to mention discussion and debate on critical issues related to social justice and the eradication of oppression. However, I often did not bring the same critical eye to documentary that I would bring to narrative film or even experimental film. This tendency, of course, must be deconstructed. Bill Nichols, a foundational scholar in the field of documentary studies, has written of the need to analyze the structure of documentary film in his book *Representing Reality*:
Documentaries often pleasure and appeal while their own structure remains virtually invisible, their own rhetorical strategies and stylistic choices unnoticed. “A good documentary stimulates discussion about its subject, not itself.” This serves as many documentarist’s motto, but it neglects to indicate how crucial rhetoric and form are to the realization of this goal. Despite such a motto, documentary films raise a rich array of historiographic, legal, philosophic, ethical, political, and aesthetical issues.” (x)

I think in many ways I find it easier to analyze fictional film because it is similar to analyzing a novel. In critical theory, the novel and the fictional film are often the classic objects of study and analysis. Sometimes we are tempted to watch documentary the same way we might watch television news. It is a dry reading of “facts” and news happenings around the world that are happening in the “real” world. Bill Nichols identifies documentary as a “discourse of sobriety” (29). “The notion of the history lesson as a central aspect of documentary and as a manifestation of the documentary’s affiliation with the discourses of sobriety—the ones that address the historical world of politics and economics, policy and action—shifts our expectations regarding subjectivity and objectivity” (29). Documentary, of course, is much more complex than a television news program. In fact, documentarians have many of the same decisions to make regarding style, content and form that their narrative film-producing counterparts have. While it would foolish to say that there are no differences between narrative and documentary film, what is important to discuss is documentary film’s supposedly indexical relationship to reality; what a documentary presents is “real” while what a
narrative film presents is unreal. Documentaries present a version of the real, a constructed, mediated reality that needs to be interrogated for its relationship to the world it is depicting. Documentaries should not get a free pass simply because they have a differential relationship to reality; in fact, in many ways the ethical and moral commitments of documentaries, and their producers, is far greater than that of fictional media producers.

Part of the struggle with documentary film has been that those people most affected by oppression and social stigma often have not the means to produce representations of their own lives. That has meant allowing people from outside the group being affected the ability to document the social suffering of a group they do not belong to. Similar to anthropology, often these documentary producers have not engaged in work to consider the ethical effects of their research projects. As Jay Ruby writes: “I am convinced that filmmakers along with anthropologists have the ethical, political, aesthetic, and scientific obligations to be reflexive and self-critical about their work” (64). Cultural appropriation, the process of usurping cultural traditions and practices not of your own tradition, is a very really problem in the realm of documentary film. A great example of this cultural appropriation (or cultural vampirism) is what Jennie Livingston did in the film *Paris is Burning* (1990). Livingston, a white, cissexual woman, entered into the world of African American and Latino/a queer and trans community to document the world of the ballroom, vogueing and house subcultural traditions. While Livingston went on to economic riches and critical acclaim for her overrated film, most of the people she cavalierly depicted remained in poverty, oppressed by racism, heterosexism, transphobia, violence, and HIV/AIDS. \(^1\) Livingston, by virtue of her white and class
privilege, appropriated the world of the House system for her own profit without transforming the lives of those she captured on film. In the early 1990s I had the pleasure of seeing Paris Dupree perform at my university, who is depicted in the film, talk angrily about the exploitive practices that he and other cast members were subjected to while working under the thumb of Livingston’s direction. bell hooks has detailed the issue of Livingston’s cultural appropriation in her brilliant essay “Is Paris Burning?”

Livingston’s appropriative model is due to a lack of reflexivity. Like the journalist who wishes to create an “objective” account of the world through reporting that erases the reporter’s own subjectivity, documentarians often participate in a similar kind of well-meaning, but highly illusory, discursive practice. Reflexivity requires a greater critical awareness of the role of the filmmaker in the production of the documentary, including the way their own often privileged subject position reproduces hegemonic power structures. “To be reflexive is to reveal that films—all films, whether they are labeled fiction, documentary, or art—are created, structured articulations of the filmmaker and not authentic, truthful, objective records…Reflexivity offers us a means whereby we can instruct our audiences to understand the process of producing statements about the world” (Ruby 74-75). It is fair to say that sometimes documentary films say more about the filmmaker than about the subject they purport to represent. While reflexivity does not resolve the many contradictions inherent in the genre, it does make the “process of producing statements about the world” more transparent and therefore more subject to productive critique and cultural criticism.

Livingston’s case is just one example of a larger problem. Transgender people have been represented by cissexual people in documentary film over and over again. Jay
Ruby writes: “The documentary film was founded on the Western middle-class need to explore, document, explain, understand, and hence symbolically control the world. It has been what ‘we’ do to ‘them.’ “They’ in this case are usually the poor, the powerless, the disadvantaged, and the politically suppressed and oppressed” (emphasis mine 71).

Following this trend, many of the depictions of trans people in documentary have been filled with stereotypes, clichés and barely concealed prejudice. At worst, they continue the demonization of transgender people. At best, they present us as victims. The socio-cultural matrix in which we live is often erased and rendered invisible. This, for me, is one of the most maddening problems with these documentaries. Trans people making documentaries about our own lives is vitally important at this historical juncture.

Often, when one so much as mentions a claim like the one above, one is charged with being an “essentialist.” I find this reflexive accusation of “essentialism” to be deeply problematic. It seems to me self-evident that a non-trans-identified person could make an excellent, rich and politically astute documentary about the trans, genderqueer and gender non-conforming communities. Further, a trans person could also make a film that is sloppy, politically conservative or filled with sensationalistic or distorted images of trans people. However, to ignore issues of social location seems to me to be incredibly premature. I look forward to more films about trans subjects made by trans writers, producers and directors, not because I believe in the promise of a uniquely transgender aesthetic or in a universally radical trans standpoint that will produce challenging images, but because busting through the concrete ceiling of who gets to be a cultural producer is still an important breakthrough for the community.
The debate about essentialism is important, because we, of course, do not want to reproduce essentialist positions that limit creativity and artistic/cultural production based on strict notions of identity politics. However, it seems to me that this debate also serves to conceal more important questions of power, influence, educational attainment and access to capital. While it is true that filmmaking is much more accessible now than ever before, historically it would often necessitate education (the skills and know-how to shoot and edit a film) as well as financial capital (money for productions costs) and a way to distribute the film, get it into film festivals and garner a wide audience to view it. These basic needs of money, education and connections say nothing about deeper psychological needs of helping an extremely oppressed group to have the confidence and self-esteem to make a film and become a filmmaker, which has often been seen as a privileged artistic category unto itself. Next, I would like to discuss some of the trans documentaries in the historical film canon.

**Early Trans Documentaries and Their Common Features**

One of the earliest documentaries to feature people on the transgender spectrum is Frank Simon’s 1968 film *The Queen*, which follows the contestants in a 1967 drag competition held in New York City. Although the competition often overshadows the people’s lives, there are conversations about a variety of other topics, including transsexuality and sex reassignment surgery, the draft and the Vietnam War, and being gay and being a drag queen performer. The film also chronicles the relationship between the queens, including much negativity, cattiness and competitiveness. Joseph Horning’s more intimate 1973 documentary is a portrait of an African American trans person named *Valerie*. She discusses her family background, life as a drag queen in 1970s America,
and her engagement in sex work to survive economically. Both *The Queen* and *Valerie* provide early glimpses into drag/trans life before the subject became more widely covered beginning in the 1980s and especially the 1990s. 1984’s *What Sex Am I?*, is an hour-long HBO documentary about transgender people. While trying to be earnest and compassionate, it still marginalized the gender-queer body to a shadowy underworld existence. ⁴

In addition, a tremendous amount of emphasis has been placed on the technologization of trans bodies (hormones and surgeries), on “before” and “after” comparison of pre- and post-transitioning, on white, middle-class transsexualism, and on prurient and sensationalized interest in transgender sexual and erotic practices. Documentaries generally do not show trans people engaged in political activism or situated in trans communities, and rarely do they engage with issues of race, class and the often-violent implications of the gender binary.

In a world where reality TV and documentary film are increasingly blurred, it is interesting to note that one of the first reality TV genres might well be the tabloid, daytime, television talk show. I believe that talk shows emerged as the new form of the traveling circus sideshow, and it is no accident that “hermaphrodites,” bearded ladies and half men—half women were mainstays in these traveling circus entertainments: cultural history has shown a persistent human interest in gender and sexual ambiguity. ⁵ Despite the pervasive hegemony of dominant sex and gender codes, transgression of these categories has proved to be a durable form of interest and entertainment. Since the emergence of *The Phil Donahue Show* in the early 1970s, various forms of sex and gender crossing have become mainstays of daytime TV. These programs have always
been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they give visibility to gender minorities and resist the cultural imperative to sweep such issues under the rug. However, is all visibility necessarily good visibility? The problem is the ways in which gender diversity became constrained, framed and disciplined within these programs. Typically, the full breadth of gender diversity was not shown, and if it was, it was done in a sensationalized “look at the freaks” format.6

One of the most troubling and persistent traits of both talk shows and documentaries about trans people—from the beginning up to the present—has been an absolute obsession with the physical, the sexual and the biological. The body became fixed as an entity that needed to be explicitly (and often scientifically) understood. Like the doctor with the pointer in *Let Me Die a Woman*, audiences were fed specific information which then became constructed as necessary knowledge. The discourses about transsexualism, set by media producers, were often narrowly defined. And, of course, they often operated by the dictum “sex sells” and therefore inflated the importance of sex: both the “naughty bits” and the sexual act. What do post-op genitals look like? What do they feel like? Are they able to have orgasms, or multiple orgasms? How do trans people have sex? With whom do they want to have sex? How is the surgery done? How much does the surgery cost? This obsession with corporeality is anything but subversive or progressive. It fulfilled a need to satisfy curiosity, but it was also an attempt to put gender back together in ways that furthered gender binarity and heterosexism.7

To some extent, transsexualism as a concept has the potential to disrupt status quo notions of gender. Harold Garfinkel identifies several rules of gender, and one of these
rules is that gender is invariable. When you are born, your genitalia is the primary
signifier of gender, and you remain bound to that genital category from cradle to grave. How does transsexualism intervene in this type of thinking? Transsexualism does
demonstrate that gender can be changed. Unfortunately, this knowledge did not
fundamentally transform the gender ideologies of most non-trans spectators. Many
simply gazed at the male-to-female transsexed body and exclaimed: “I don’t care what
you do, what hormones you take or surgeries you have performed on your body. You
were born a man and you will remain one until the day you die.” Trans people were seen
as mentally ill, psychopathic or rebellious, but not as being what they claimed: members
of a gender that did not correspond to their assigned birth sex. Other spectators, which
many would construe as more liberal, genuinely accepted the transsexuals’ self-
identification and welcomed them into their new, but still binary, gender role. While we
may well see the second scenario as preferable to the first, the work of gender
deconstruction is still not performed. Either one is stuck in their birth sex or they cross
the binary and are accepted as the “opposite” sex. This may be acceptable for those trans
people with a binary gender identity, but for those who straddle or transcend notions of
gender, representations continued to be sensationalistic or nonexistent.

The reinforcement of the binary gender system is a key motive of these texts. For
example, although What Sex Am I? contains portraits of both cross-dressers and
transsexuals, of both MTFs and FTMs, it is ultimately threatened by gender variance that
is not resolved in and through the conceptualizations of Western psychiatric and
sexological discourses. The film profiles a “shadowy” world of “she-male” night
creatures that teeter along the lines between male and female: female from the waist up
and male from the waist down. In a pre-genderqueer and pre-Third Wave feminism cultural milieu of the mid-1980s, radical and ambiguous departures from male and female, masculine and feminine, still produced tremendous anxiety. If one crossed from male to female and back again (the cross-dresser) or permanently from female to male (transsexual) one’s body is still recuperable within the logics of gender-normative patriarchy. If one’s position permanently straddles, transcends, violates or blurs gender, then it is much more difficult to simplistically reassemble binary notions of sex, gender and desire.

Another historical obsession of the trans documentary has been the predominance of white, middle-class, middle-aged, professional transsexuals. People of color, youth, trans people with disabilities, those who are economically challenged, and those working in blue-collar and sex industries are notably absent, especially in documentaries made before the 2000s. This privileging of whiteness and affluence helped to forge a skewed and incomplete vision of the transgender community. Issues of racism and white privilege, as well as class privilege and the ability to gain access to needed medical and psychological care, were seldom critiqued in early trans documentaries.

The perpetuation of transgender norms from the outside also helped to construct self-regulating cultural imperatives. From heteronormativity, homonormativity was spawned, as author Lisa Duggan points out in *The Twilight of Equality*. Duggan writes that the new homonormativity is a “politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (50). Gay and lesbians subjects internalize dominant cultural mores and
reproduce them in their own communities. Examples could include gaining the right to
civil marriage, serving in the military, or being in a committed relationship and having
kids à la heterosexual, nuclear families. Gays and lesbians can then potentially become
enforcers who police other gay subjects to behave in ways consistent with their
assimilationist ideologies. In addition, gay people can regulate their own behaviors to
conform to the dictates of heterosexist society. I question whether we are in the
beginning stages of transnormativity and whether or how much transnormative
discourses are shaped by media productions. Transnormativity recreates and replicates
hegemonic and bourgeois facets of Western subjectivities, particularly in regards to race,
class and social rank. Above and beyond the reconsolidation of race and class privileges
so ubiquitous in Western culture, transnormativity and its myriad of images and
representations also adhere to traditional trajectories of transsexual identity. For instance,
the pregnancy of Thomas Beatie was not met with universal approval by members of the
trans community. Some saw his pregnancy as a betrayal of his male identity and believe
that becoming pregnant and giving birth is not an activity that female-to-male
transsexuals should want to engage in. I believe they are forwarding a transnormative
discourse that puts limits on the human freedom of gender-variant people and encourages
the community to regulate behaviors that are transgressive in the work they do to push
the cultural envelope. However, given the relative lack of political capital and power in
the trans community, I believe that the majority of these normalizing discourses continue
to be pushed by people outside the trans community.

Most trans people in traditional documentaries adhere to the Standards of Care
(SOC), and seem eager to jump through the hoops that the “experts” want them to:
psychological counseling, hormonal therapy, full sex reassignment surgery, facial feminization surgery, electrolysis, and gender expressions which are legible and intelligible to lead to “correct” attributions. A big part of this deals with “passing,” the ability to be perceived all of the time as the gender of choice. The transgender medical, psychological and training industries include many procedures, lessons and products to help the trans person “successfully” pass in their desired gender role. The mass-mediated images of the transsexual help to construct and reinforce a hierarchy of correctness and goodness: this is what a “good” transsexual looks like, this is what a “correct” transsexual does. The good and the correct, of course, follow the dictates laid down by the old guard of transsexual ideology: the fathers and grandfathers of proper protocol who speciously believe that they hold the light and the key.  

The transgender revolution that began in the early to mid 1990s has changed all of this in significant ways. The train has left the station. Transpeople are challenging the old guard on multiple fronts. A great example of this is the outcry from the community following the publication of J. Michael Bailey’s book *The Man Who Would be Queen*. Bailey, a non-trans white, heterosexual, male psychology professor at Northwestern, wrote specious theories about trans women and tried to pass them off as science. Unlike his predecessors, the emergence of an organized and politicized trans community coupled with the communicative power of the Internet, mobilized the opposition that yielded a formidable response. Bailey, who attempts to shoe-horn the wildly diverse group of trans women into his own homophobic and misogynistic taxonomy, was roundly and correctly blasted by a community that refused to be contained by the fathers of transsexualism.
The Transgender Revolutionary I detail in this chapter is, of course, highly subjective. However, I wanted to discuss my vision of some of the traits of the Transgender Revolutionary, particularly as they relate to the media texts that follow. The most important trait of the Transgender Revolutionary is that they have a sense of agency and an ability to critique and interrogate the culture in which they live. Transgender Revolutionaries are committed to radical social change and understand that decolonizing their own mind from the old-guard psychiatric empire is an important step in personal and political liberation. Transgender Revolutionaries are committed to intersectional analyses of oppression and interested in building progressive coalitions for changes across lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, age and nation. Transgender Revolutionaries see assimilationist strategies as highly problematic and seek a more formidable paradigm shift in society and culture. Transgender Revolutionaries blatantly reject the invisibility of the “closet” and demand full access to public space, including visibility and the right not to “pass.” While Transgender Revolutionaries fight for the safety of people to move from one gender to another, they also fight for people to be both, neither and to change the way they identify. Transgender Revolutionaries believe that all people deserve the right to safe and affordable housing, healthy food, culturally competent medical care (including transgender services) and meaningful work. Transgender Revolutionaries believe in the power of activism, legal advocacy and speaking truth to power, and participate in a wide breadth of strategies to challenge the status quo and change the culture in which they live. Obviously, while some people presented in these films would identify as revolutionaries, many others would not. In some ways the identifier is more metaphorical than literal. However, all of the people
profiled do embody at least some of these traits, and the films taken collectively constitute a major breakthrough in how transgender people are represented in media culture.

This move to autonomy and decolonization has been paralleled by the exciting, albeit slow, trickle of new images of gender variant folks. A “New Wave” of trans documentaries, all produced in the new millennium, has boldly challenged these stereotypes about trans bodies, identities and sense of agency. Films such as Fenced Out (2001), Toilet Training (2004), Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton’s Cafeteria (2005), and Cruel and Unusual (2006) all forward an unapologetically progressive political agenda. These films all represent trans people in new and visionary ways, not as curious bodies for passive consumption by hegemonic culture, but as engaged political agents dedicated to radical social change and cultural transformation. These films have no interest in “justifying” trans identity or explaining “Trans 101” to dominant culture. It is very important that these films feature transpeople on their own terms, not only giving voice to their own experiences but allowed the discursive space to engage with issues that are all too often minimized or ignored by mainstream media. These documentaries do not feel compelled to explain the etiology of trans identity or justify trans existence through sanitization, condescension or resorting to sites of hegemonic discursivity, i.e. “trapped in the wrong body” narratives. Rather they engage with issues such as police brutality, gendered violence, gentrification, the binary gender system, abuse in the prison industrial complex, and epistemic oppression while also clearly articulating trans resistance, agency, voice and collective power. My next goal in this chapter is to discuss the historical shift in terms of representation, and to stress the educative, political and
emancipatory potentiality of these films beginning with a focus on one 2001’s *Fenced Out*.

**Fenced Out: Fighting Back Against Gentrification**

*Fenced Out* begins with a single word on the screen: Imagine. The narrator speaks over the song “This Used to Be My Playground” by Madonna. The narrator cajoles the spectator to imagine what it would be like to be rejected your whole life, to have everyone turn their backs on you. Finally you discover a place where you can be yourself, a place that becomes your stomping ground, but then that place comes under attack. Queer and trans youth of color on camera discuss why the Christopher Street Piers of Greenwich Village are so important to them. It is the one place they can go to find people like themselves, people “in the life.” It is a place they can go to meet people without having to spend money. It is a place where people can go to dress in drag and “fag out” because they cannot do that in the space of their own neighborhoods or families. Sadly, this space of acceptance and possibility is under serious attack through an entity called the Hudson River Park Trust, a joint effort of the city and the state of New York. The trust was initiated by former Mayor Rudy Guilliani and former Governor George Pataki to “increase the quality of life” for all New Yorkers. The obvious question is: whose quality of life? The answer: mostly white, gender-normative, economically-privileged professionals. The trans and queer economically-challenged youth of color are left out in the cold.

Hudson River Park is a massive project to redevelop five miles along the Manhattan shoreline from Battery Place to West 59th Street. Major funding for the project comes from the city and state of New York. The Hudson River Park Trust makes
decisions about the plans and they often do not take a truly diverse community
perspective into account. Several of the piers have long been a haven for LGBT people,
particularly LGBT youth of color. The capitalism and gentrification practices of the City
put this community at great risk. By using on screen text, the documentary points to and
implicitly critiques the priorities of public spending:
* Total cost of the Hudson River Park construction is $330,000,000
* NYC spent around $2.3 million on LGBTQ youth programming last year
* Over 35% of NYC’s 22,000 homeless youth are GLBT
* Yet at the time of production there are zero LGBT shelters
* One transitional living program
* And two group homes = approximately 45 beds

The interviewed youth state that the police constantly harass them. In fact, one of
the events that propelled the film was the arrest and detainment of one of the film’s
producers. One of the police officers told a youth that “these people,” meaning area
residents, “don’t want you here anymore, and they are the people that pay our salaries.”
The film does an excellent job of questioning the dynamics of power. Made through a
collaboration of Paper Tiger TV, Neutral Zone and FIERCE!, the film is youth-
produced and originating from the very community which is most affected by these
racist, classist and heterosexist practices.

While the film clearly shows the multiple forms of oppression to which the youth
are subject, it does not show them as victims. It shows them as fighters, activists and
community organizers. Although I have seen the film multiple times, I still get goose
bumps each and every time I watch it. It is like few films out there because it demands
that queer and trans people become proactive, be seen as agents, as people who control their own bodies, their own destinies and their own lives. That I titled this chapter Transgender Revolutionaries is not mere rhetoric. This film does not shy away from political activism and it is insistent on the need for community-wide involvement to promote lasting social change. The Change agents represented in this film are a radical departure from the transsexual subject represented in countless “procedural” documentary films. In this film, queer and trans identity are taken for granted, which necessarily changes the discourse and direction of the film. Obviously, this challenges the notion that we always need to explain our “condition” as a prerequisite for other people’s approval.

In the article “Corroding Our Quality of Life” film producer Justin Rosado discusses his own life as a Latino gay youth and his involvement with the film and political activism, including FIERCE!:

We decided that we needed to document the events that were happening--to get our story down for all to see. That’s when we started the Fenced Out video…The video was formed, filmed, directed, and edited by a group of queer youth of color who were directly affected by the events we were documenting. *Fenced Out* was a big step for FIERCE! As well as for me. Throughout the production, I learned more and more of the world of politics, queer issues, and history, as well as how to be an activist and make change. I am the person I am today because of this education and skills exchange. (295)
One of the ways the youth find their own autonomy is through investigating the history of the Piers. They discover that the Piers have changed over time, especially since Stonewall when the Gay Liberation Front helped to forge the notion of Christopher Street as a “gay street” and to promote the saying: “Whose streets? Our streets!” But the Piers started out more as a sexual playground for white, middle-class, gay men. In the film, Stonewall veteran and radical activist Sylvia Rivera is shown discussing how the Piers used to be a sexual playground for closeted gay men to have anonymous sex, while trans women sex workers used it as a working area to forge economic survival. The youth also interview Regina Shavers of the Griot Circle, who discussed her own struggle as a Black lesbian to find space, and how she had to physically fight men just to survive. She discusses her joy at finding a beach in New York City filled with lesbians and how empowered this made her feel. In this video, LGBT identity is not rendered simple or facile. The intersections of race and class are very much woven into the narrative to cajole viewers into a complex analysis of power politics and spatiality within New York City queer and trans communities.

Several youth discuss how the Piers became a social, political and cultural epicenter for them. Youth from foster care, group homes, abusive families, lockdowns and mental institutions could all find solace in the Piers. Youth remember trunks being opened and music flowing, as well as vogueing contests taking place. The legendary Willi Ninja of Paris is Burning makes a brief appearance in the film, made all the more poignant by the fact that he would die of AIDS several years later. Spoken word poet Emanuel Xavier discusses the Giuliani-era “quality of life” emphasis and how this has devastated his community and the importance of home, not only for organized houses but
for groups of friends that provided safety for one another. As another young activist states: the displacement of people will not make them disappear. However, it may mean they will be sent to the prison industrial complex or swept out of the city’s limits to make room for parks that will predominantly cater to people with privileged identities.

Despite these tremendous odds, the film shows the youth organizing, gathering petitions, speaking out and in general, fighting the powers that be. The film ends with the following spoken word:

With my place along comes my heart, my soul
My life is where you plow
Our blood is sunken into your street
And when we rise above your claws of money
once again I’ll be there
Staring into your eyes
Letting you know I will never leave.

This ending is incredibly powerful because it is ultimately about taking up space. Earlier in the film, African American lesbian Regina Shavers states that she never grew up feeling entitled to have her own space or even the right to exist. She accepted barriers, conditioned that something was wrong with her and she did not deserve more. The film highlights the importance of oppressed people fighting both external and internalized oppression, increasing their own consciousness to realize that they deserve space, a safe haven and a supportive community. Despite the tremendous obstacles, the youth in the film are in a better place because they have tasted a little bit of freedom and created a loving community through the space forged together at the Piers. Their blood is ‘sunken’
into the street. They have fought many battles for this one strip of land, and they will fight like hell to retain it, “letting you know I will never leave.” The narrator uses hir agency to demand a place and a space to be safe, to be whole and to celebrate life. The film succeeds in a producing a vitally important portrait of trans and queer resistance, of queer and trans bodies that will put their very lives on the line to achieve revolution.21

A large part of the Save our Space campaign’s success in engaging the very people most affected by the gentrification and police brutality is due to the organization FIERCE! and its organizing principles. Megan Davidson gives a detailed accounting of FIERCE! And its formation in her essay “Rethinking the Movement.” She writes:

FIERCE! activists are theorizing and actualizing multi-issue grass-roots activism that is needs-based, by and for the people most affected, building power in multiply oppressed communities, and situating themselves in a larger movement for social change…Similarly, the LGBTQ movement could benefit from re-evaluating the strategies, priorities, and goals currently guiding much activism” (259).

The fact that *Fenced Out* is not created by a person outside of the sphere represented is, of course, significant. Further, the video does not attempt to conceal a political agenda or try to give an “objective” history of the piers, although it does in fact engage history through interviewing several seminal figures. Bill Nichols writes that “documentary convention spawns an epistephilia. It posits an organizing agency that possesses information and knowledge, a text that conveys it, and a subject who will gain it” (31). I believe that this epistephilia, a love and desire for knowledge, is constructed not only in the viewing audience but with the subjects of the documentary narrative itself.
They are determined to find answers about the current state of the problem, as well as devise activist solutions for transforming the culture. In the process, they change not only the viewer, but themselves. Rosado discusses the lasting legacy of his involvement with FIERCE!:

"FIERCE! Not only empowers youth to create change in the world but also helps us to find our way in life. FIERCE! Is a sanctuary from the oppression we face, for being of color, for being young, and for being queer. I would not be in the place I am these days if it wasn’t for FIERCE! While the “mainstream” queer movement might be concentrating on marriage, we are concerned with more important things, like being able to hang out in the village without being harassed or arrested and getting the condoms, food, medical, mental health, housing and jobs we need.” (301)

Both Rosado and Davidson comment on FIERCE! for its departure from the assimilationist, mainstream gay rights movement. Its insistence on a “flood-up approach” means that the agenda is not set by concentrating on the most privileged groups in the queer community but paying attention to the most marginalized. “Rethinking movement priorities and reallocating resources in line with this flood-up approach might radically transform LGBTQ people’s lives and create a more effective movement” (Davidson 254). By centering the experiences of LGBT youth of color battling for safe space, the film cajoles more privileged queer viewers to reexamine their activist priorities and the homonormative practices encouraged by groups like the Human Rights Campaign (HRC).
Ultimately, the film opens up debate about gentrification and state violence that relates to the issue of property-ownership under capitalism. Writing about gay marriage, Priya Kandaswamy writes: “marriage is a legal institution that is fundamentally about preserving property relations” (Bailey et.al 92). In a similar vein, the West Village residents who are hostile to the youth and use the police to harass them are also fundamentally concerned about their property and its maintenance. As Imani Henry states:

If you are a rich developer and you want to make sure that this is prime real estate, then you are going to do everything in your power to get community boards and the kinds of clientele that can afford to pay $3,000 for a studio. And you are going to get the police to do watches on the streets and harass people and close clubs down, and file phony violations on spaces, and literally physically arrest, brutalize and beat people to get them out of the area. (Shepard 110)22

This valiant fight for public space and a more complex rendering of gender is also relevant to the next film.

**Bathroom Politics and the Activist Training Film *Toilet Training***

In contemporary US culture, almost all public restrooms are separated on the basis of sex: female on one side, male on the other. The division set between the socially constructed categorizations of “man” and “woman” are brazenly put on display in the space of the public restroom. Through the iconography of the “man” (in pants) and the “woman” (in a dress), individuals passing through the doors of the bathroom are continually created and re-created as properly gendered subjects. The ubiquitous
presence of sex-segregated restrooms illustrates the hegemonic construction of sex and
gender in American culture. Psychoanalytic critic Jacques Lacan terms such an
arrangement “urinary segregation”\textsuperscript{23} while transgender author Martine Rothblatt has
dubbed it the “bathroom bugaboo.”\textsuperscript{24}

The issue has serious ramifications for some people who identify as trans,
genderqueer or gender nonconforming. When many cissexual people walk through that
plastic male or female icon, they carry with them an expectation that people within that
restroom will be coherently identifiable as “male” or “female.” But what if your gender
expression is neither clearly male or clearly female? What if you identify as female but
your bodily configuration makes passing as female difficult or impossible? Because of
the strict rigidity of the public restroom’s sexual dichotomy, many people in the trans
communities are affected by the daily gender oppression of being policed within public
space. “You do not belong in here!” These punishments can range from verbal abuse, to
whispers and points, to physical assault and arrest. “This surveillance of deviant bodies
and practices in bathrooms all too often takes the form of brutal physical violence.
Genderqueer and trans-identified folks have been attacked in public restrooms simply
because their appearance threatens gender norms and expectations” (Chess et al 195).
What goes on in restrooms is taboo (urinating, defecation, public sex, etc.) and thus many
people titter when the subject of restrooms is even brought up. Thus trans activists and
our allies have a fight to politicize what happens in public restrooms and a struggle to
make what happens there serious and not a “joke.” “Bathroom talk is considered
politically dangerous, or at least irrelevant, because of a fear that it will be seen as a
trivial issue, prompting the mainstream culture to not take us seriously. Political activism
is supposed to be about ideas, the mind, and larger social movements, not about who pees where” (Chess et.al 193).

I believe that the restroom divide does not simply reflect a discrete separation between male and female. It actively constructs sexual difference through identifying and policing gendered identities in public space. Every time a person walks through a door innocuously marked “male” or “female” they are reifying the entire project of gender. Gender-segregated restrooms reinforce an artificial “difference” that supports the oppression of gender-variant people. Not having to think about which restroom one uses as an excellent example of cissexual privilege. Many of us have to fear harassment in the restroom, not only based on conjecture, but on multiple experiences of being harassed in our past.

Public restroom segregation is a primary site which functions to create, recreate and maintains the male/female binary itself. In American society, the vast majority of people believe that there are two discrete sex/gender groups: male and female. The different “equipment” of these social groups necessitates public restrooms that are strictly divided on the basis of sex. As Rothblatt asserts: “We live under an apartheid of sex. At birth we are cast into a sex type based on our genitals. From then on we are brainwashed into a sex-type-appropriate culture called gender” (19). From birth onwards, children are acculturated to believe particular ideologies about gender and sexuality. While some parents explicitly try to raise their children in a gender-free or non-sexist manner, the majority continues to learn specific messages about what constitutes the idealized female or male gender role. This apartheid extends beyond the restroom into other parts of the “public” domain. In addition to restrooms, locker rooms, many schools, prisons and jails,
some country clubs, fraternal organizations, fraternities and sororities, dormitories, athletic teams, dressing and changing rooms and many other institutions are gender-segregated. In these and other cultural locales, the line between male and female is religiously maintained and policed. One of the defining criteria of a dichotomy is that the two parts of it are assumed to represent an exhaustive whole. Male and female, man and woman, are seen as the sole sex/gender categories in American society. This is absolutely false, and for this reason alone, the sex segregation of restrooms is ethically, legally and culturally indefensible.

In *Queer Theory and Social Change*, Max H. Kirsch passionately critiques queer theory for its utter failure to promote a progressive, activist platform for revolutionary change. He makes a point that is important to the issue of restroom politics. “Recognizing the ideological means through which categorization and oppression operate does not negate the material foundations of their development” (110). Too much of queer theory has pontificated endlessly on gender and sexual difference in culture, but not moved beyond those critiques to forward material analyses that suggest pragmatic options for real and lasting socio-cultural transformation. So while sexual apartheid in public restrooms is indeed an ideological issue, how do we move to grass-roots activism that understand that theory while simultaneously moving beyond it? Kirsch notes: “A truly radicalized politics assumes that the goal of analysis and action is the transformation of a culture that diminishes freedom and choice. Any movement that claims to work toward eliminating these culturally rooted elements of the dominant ideology must recognize that constructions of gender and sexuality are connected to the maintenance of the social order” (111). Gender-segregated restrooms function to maintain the hegemonic
social order, and transpeople suffer as a result. Restrooms have long been a site of struggle in social justice movements. In the 1950s Jim Crow segregation, public restrooms were segregated on the basis of race: designated as being for “whites” or for “coloreds.” It was nonviolent direct action which worked to expose the hatefulfulness of this situation and demand an end to racial segregation in the U.S. Sadly, efforts to desegregate on gender have been less successful. In the 1970s, reactionary anti-feminist Phyllis Schlafly helped to defeat the Equal Rights Amendment by, among other things, claiming that it would result in gender-mixed public restrooms. More recently, opponents of gender identity/expression-inclusive nondiscrimination bills have utilized fears about public restrooms to oppose trans civil rights. This bathroom-baiting was illustrated in 2009 in the state of NH when lawmakers caved into fear of male predators stalking and assaulting women and girls in women’s restrooms and using the gender identity bill as a cover for their predations. On campus, some have decried efforts at creating and designating gender-neutral restrooms as the height of political correctness run amok and trying to procure special rights for a tiny fringe minority group.

The fight to create a “restroom revolution” is going to be a long and arduous battle. Public restroom segregation is very entrenched in American cultural life. Despite the persistence of this system, however, there are more and more people whose very identities rupture traditional notions of sex and gender, and whose activism is shaking sexuality as we know it to the core. Among these are people working on the bathroom issue, and the wonderful gem of a film *Toilet Training* helps to tell some of these restroom revolutionaries’ powerful stories of resistance.
Toilet Training: Law and Order (In the Bathroom) is a 2003, 30-minute video produced by Tara Mateik and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, (SRLP), which is a non-profit initiative in New York City founded by trans attorney Dean Spade to provide legal assistance to trans people of color and low income trans people. Spade was arrested in Grand Central Station in 2002 for attempting to use the men’s restroom. He was held for 23 hours and eventually released on his own recognizance. The event, along with countless stories of bathroom discrimination from his clients, helped to galvanize Spade and SRLP to do something to address this issue. Toilet Training, like the zine Piss and Vinegar, was born out of a need to impact social change and educate non-trans people about transgender identity and restroom access.28

The film uses humor to try to defuse what for many is a very controversial and touchy subject. This is similar to the group PISSAR using humor in their restroom activism. “Our attention to the body (the pissing and shitting body), and our insistence that we talk about the specificities of people’s embodied experiences with humor rather than shame, challenges the normalizing drive found within both queer and disability communities” (Chess et al 197). Toilet Training riffs on Law and Order by using the theme music and graphics from the popular television show. The film shows the date and place of various bathroom incidents, and then discusses each instance of harassment, violence or arrest. A pro-football player for DC Divas was arrested at a TGI Fridays in Laurel, Maryland for using the women’s bathroom. She identifies as female and as lesbian. Dana Turner, a MTF transgender, African American attorney, was beaten in a men’s room prior to her transition for being perceived as an effeminate gay male. Spade talks about his own arrest and offers the following comment: “In large part when you try
to talk to people about bathrooms, and about the problems with gender-segregated bathrooms, because bathrooms and everything that goes on in bathrooms are taboo in our society, people will giggle. They don’t see that it’s very serious. They’re not aware of the pervasive nature of the day-to-day discrimination and harassment and humiliation that trans and gender-variant people face in bathrooms.” The film is ideally suited for educational purposes and as a training tool for activists because it uses humor to introduce the idea and then uses very serious and powerful testimony from trans people themselves about their experiences navigating sex-segregated facilities.

The film deals with transgender bathroom access and its intersection with race, dis/ability, age and class. Carrie Davis notes that many of the gender-variant folks harassed in public bathrooms are often also people of color, youth, homeless and poor. One ally to a trans woman notes that he consistently sees African American trans women being targeted by police for using women’s restrooms. It is well documented that Black trans women at the restrooms by the piers in New York were frequently targeted to chase them out of the area, which intersects with the our previous film. Toilet Training also interviews a disabled transgender activist, Eli Clare, who draws on the intersection between disability and transgender to discuss how gender-neutral bathrooms create more options for everyone. A person with a disability and their “opposite sex” personal care attendant are also interviewed to point out the need for facilities that take their reality into account.²⁹

Although the film discusses bathroom harassment in public facilities such as Grand Central Station and the Christopher Street Piers, the video also focuses on schools and the workplace, as these are the places trans people often spend the most time. The
film interviews several diverse trans youth who report harassment and insensitivity from their junior high and high school administrations regarding bathroom access. It is extremely difficult for trans youth to navigate the coming out process; the perennial “bathroom bugaboo” simply adds another layer of adversity for them to cope with. Lack of accessible restrooms in school can cause trans youth to have increased depression and anxiety, and even cause them to drop out of school altogether. Similarly, employers have a responsibility to address bathroom access for employees who are transitioning on the job. Sadly, many employers react with hostility and are more worried about other employees being offended by a transgendered person in the restroom than in protecting the rights of the trans minority.

Public safety is a big issue on both sides of the gender and restrooms debate. The film adeptly handles this issue by confronting it directly and with sophistication and sensitivity. Spade notes that “when you mark an ‘M’ or an ‘F’ on a door, it does not function as a lock.” Perhaps most notable are the remarks of Amber Hollibaugh, who does an excellent job of addressing the issue of trans bathroom access and violence against women:

The real question if we’re going to try to talk about safety would not be a bathroom that was gendered but a bathroom that you completely controlled. If what we were most concerned about was making sure that no one was vulnerable to attack then what we’d do is construct bathrooms where people had complete control over the space. Meaning you could open a door and walk in and close the door and lock it and you wouldn’t share it with anybody else. It’s always interesting to me how it gets
displaced into a question of assault because it puts one group of people that are oppressed against another group of people that are oppressed. And to me frankly they look like they should be allies. And bathroom safety should be something that women most understand someone needing precisely because of the role it’s often played in women’s lives.

Here, Hollibaugh touches on several key issues. Firstly, safety is de-linked from the notion that gender-divided space provides automatic safety. Rapes already happen in sex-segregated facilities and some of these assaults are same-sex assaults. The idea also furthers the outdated and biologically essentialist notion that men are not going to be able to control themselves in mixed-gender space. It has by now become a well-known fact that rape is concerned chiefly with power and domination, not sex or eroticism. The perpetrator of a rape is unlikely to be deterred from committing a rape by a plastic icon on a door, whether that icon is male or female. This does not, of course, negate the question of safety. Rather, it switches the set of terms from one concerned with the preservation of gendered distinctions and spaces to one concerned about physical and psychological safety and security for all people, including women, men, trans and intersex folks. For instance, Rothblatt recommends the use of video cameras in restrooms. “For about the cost of a single modern urinal, each public restroom could also be equipped with a continuous loop camera high above the exit door. This would have the same effect on discouraging restroom crime as when such cameras are installed elsewhere” (94). The merits of this plan are certainly debatable, but they speak to the issue in ways that highlight safety rather than characterize efforts to desegregate bathrooms as akin to encouraging rape or pandering to the criminal-minded.
The film ends by profiling an organization that has changed its office bathrooms to unisex facilities. The Urban Justice League (UJL) transformed its traditionally sex-segregated restrooms to “All-Gender” bathrooms with great success.

The film serves as an excellent video activist tool, whereby activists, educators and others can use the message of the video to provoke important dialogues and initiate change at the grass-roots level. On the Sylvia Rivera Law Project website, there is a downloadable companion guide which includes discussion questions, talking points, the results of a bathroom survey, sample letters for bathroom activism and a list of resources for further education and organizing. Taken together, the film and the companion guide provide an excellent tool for pro-actively advocating for gender-neutral facilities and combating the bathroom backlash on campuses and throughout society.

The binaries of public/private and male/female are firmly entrenched in the very fabric of American society. The binary differentiation between types of spaces, bodies, genders and sexualities is a prime component of patriarchal systems of domination. The current bathroom system privileges the convenience and safety of traditionally gendered men, while women and trans people are marginalized and rendered unsafe. Rather than become “allies” as Hollibaugh notes, oppressed groups tend to battle against each other rather than confront the central issue. The efforts of groups on campuses across the nation have been slowly chipping away at sexual dimorphism in an effort to foster more gender-neutral facilities and a more inclusive and trans-friendly environment. Videos like *Toilet Training* initiate important dialogues and stimulate individuals and groups to fight for bathroom reform or even for a restroom revolution.
It is my hope that years from now we will look back on the era of gender-segregated bathrooms and say: “What was all the fuss about? Why didn’t they just let people “pee in peace”? But I’m sure this will only happen with continued lobbying, educational trainings, agitating, organizing, unity-building and both grass-roots and macro-level, institutional efforts. It was Frederick Douglass who stated that without resistance there is no progress. Dean Spade and the other activist profiled in *Toilet Training* are Transgender Revolutionaries because they not only lived through the oppression but they used their voices and their power to organize and change things. The film does not just present trans and gender non-conforming folks as victims of oppressive public restroom policies. It clearly articulates the oppression, but then goes on to show that in the face of state-sanctioned violence and harassment, transpeople and our allies are fomenting revolutionary change through our individual and collective activist practices. In addition, as in *Fenced Out*, the importance of intersectionality and coalitional politics is clearly represented. While restroom access is an important issue for many genderqueer and trans communities, it is also important for people with disabilities, menstruating people, people with children of a different gender etc. It is my sincere hope that trans activists and their allies are strong and persistent in their continued quest to dismantle sexual apartheid and further gender freedom, justice, safety and accessibility for all. Bathroom politics need to move from an often laughed-about, taboo topic to a serious public health and public safety issue that affects us all. As mentioned earlier, this struggle is not only limited to the site of the public restroom. In fact, the stakes are even higher when we talk about transgender people and their placement in the prison system.
Trans Women in Prison: An Exploration of Cruel and Unusual

The topic of sexual apartheid continues in the very important film Cruel and Unusual. Only this time the subject of sexed segregation is the U.S. prison industrial complex. Prisons are segregated on the basis of sex in U.S. society. What does this mean for transsexual and transgender people? If a transsexual woman is post-operative, most likely she will be placed in the female prison. However, if she is pre- or non-operative, she will be placed in the men’s prison. This obviously then exposes her to extensive and severe harassment, sexual assault and transphobic abuse from other inmates and prison staff. This is one of the few cultural productions to sensitively explore the issue of transgender women and the hell they endure while living in men’s prisons.

Cruel and Unusual (2006) was produced by Janet Baus, Dan Hunt and Reid Williams. It follows the lives of five transgender women of various ages, races and geographical locations who are currently or formerly housed in men’s prisons. The film is a harrowing journey that exposes the unbelievable levels of oppression that these women face. The film takes its title from the Eighth Amendment to the U.S. constitution, which forbids the use of cruel and unusual punishments. The film sets out to prove the ways in which transgender women are subjected to cruel and unusual punishments when they are placed in men’s prisons.

Sexual harassment, rape and assault are all common problems that transgender women face in men’s prison. Yolanda Valentin, a 21-year-old transgender woman of color, discusses being desired as a “jail wife” in men’s prisons. She reports men looking
for pretty-looking and young transgender women to use as a surrogate wife while they are in prison. Yolanda reports men coming into her cell and raping her, despite her efforts to stop them. Yolanda was on hormones since age 12 or 13, dropped out of school in the sixth grade, had an absent father and a mother who was a drug addict. In order to survive economically, she prostituted herself from the ages of ten to nineteen. Sexual harassment is not limited to abuse by other prisoners. Another subject in the film, Anna Connelly, reports being sexual harassed and molested by a prison guard at the Florida Department of Corrections.33 When she complains about the harassment she is warned that she is likely “to turn up dead.” While the film suggests that one in ten men are raped in prison, the number for transgender women is not known. Linda Thompson suggests that while most men in prison are heterosexual, the absence of cissexual females makes them turn to men and transgender women to use sexually, often termed situational homosexuality. While they dislike the trans woman’s penis, they are attracted to her femininity and use her mouth and anus as surrogate vaginas. As Linda states, if the trans woman is not willing to “give it up,” the men will “take it.”

The film notes that approximately 30% of transgender people are incarcerated at some point in their lives, which is three times the national average. In many ways, this is not surprising given the incredible oppression that transgender people face in our society. Transgender people are often harassed in schools, leading to higher drop-out rates. They may be uncomfortable accessing higher education due to transphobia, gender-segregated residence halls and lack of financial resources. They may be discriminated against in housing and lack a stable place to live. And most importantly, transgender people face a massive level of unemployment and underemployment in the United States. According
Nearly 60% of \textit{Good Jobs NOW!} respondents earn under $15,300 annually and only 8% earn over $45,900. 40\% do not have a bank account of any kind. Only 25\% are working full-time, 16\% are working part-time, and nearly 9\% have no source of income. Over 57\% percent report experiencing employment discrimination, but only a little over 12\% have filed an administrative or civil complaint as a result.$^{34}$

Given the crisis in education, housing and employment, it should be no surprise that many transgender people resort to illegal activities to survive. Sex work, theft and writing bad checks are usually linked to the precarious economic position of transgender people in US society. As Namaste writes in \textit{Sex Change, Social Change}: “Transsexuals end up in jail because of the criminalization of drugs and prostitution, coupled with policing practices that target visibly different individuals on the street” (37-38) Theft and prostitution are featured in several of the stories in \textit{Cruel and Unusual}. The film, in addition to demonstrating the horrors faced by trans women in prison, also illuminates the myriad of challenges that trans women encounter to make a livable life for themselves in our society.

Linda Thompson’s story illustrates this theme poignantly. Linda worked for many years on the oil rigs drilling in the western U.S. When she transitioned she was basically blackballed from working in the industry. A very macho occupation would not hire Linda as a transsexual woman, despite her many years of experience in the field. Linda learned to ride the freight trains and to cope with the tremendous emotional pain
became an alcoholic. Eventually, she stole aluminum wire and sold it for scrap to make money. She was put in prison for the theft and thus began a hellish seven-year odyssey in the Idaho correctional facility. Ashley, an African American transsexual woman profiled in the film, wound up in jail when she opened a bank account in somebody else’s name and began to write bad checks. She states that she became addicted to the “fast money” and describes herself as a “good girl gone bad” who dropped out of school. However one feels about crime and punishment, one cannot watch this film and fail to adequately contextualize these transgender women’s lives and the decisions that they make. While the film does not suggest the subjects are free of all wrong doing, it does assert that their lived experiences as multiply oppressed people in the U.S. has had much to do with their placement in the prison industrial complex.

The documentary film accomplishes this by placing its trans subjects in a real socio-cultural framework. While so many others documentaries give short shrift to discrimination, in Cruel and Unusual it is centralized. Thus, we learn of the women’s backgrounds and past experiences, particularly with violence, economic marginalization and physical and emotional health. From abused childhoods to low self-esteem, their actions, including their criminal deeds, are contextualized within a life marred by multiple forms of oppression and self-hatred. The film humanizes its subjects, unlike many sensationalistic documentaries of the past. Viewers are entrusted to think critically about trans issues and about the prison industrial complex by engaging with the stories of people they meet as unique individuals caught up in a system of dehumanization and sadistic cruelty. The film is not didactic, but it does invite viewers to think about power and its relation to criminal justice, gender and intersectional identities.
Even those who may support tough sentences for criminals cannot avert their eyes to the “cruel and unusual” nature of these punishments. As Angela Davis notes, more and more people have come to see the barbarity of being sentenced to execution for a crime. “Many people have already reached the conclusion that the death penalty is an outmoded form of punishment that violates basic principles of human rights. It is time, I believe, to encourage similar conversations about them prison” (10). This film, and the treatment of trans women in men’s prisons more generally, can serve a vital function in furthering that pivotal dialogue.

In addition to sexual assault and harassment, another of the subjects that the film addresses is the issue of “protective custody.” Since prison officials are increasingly aware of the dangers posed to transgender women in men’s prisons, one of the strategies they have utilized to promote harm reduction is what is variously called: protective custody, solitary confinement, 24-hour-lockdown or being thrown in “the hole.” Basically, this involves moving the transgender woman out of general population and placing her in a tiny cell where she is completely alone for almost the entire day. For many years, critics have denounced this form of holding prisoners as barbaric and as a form of cruel and unusual punishment. They believe it causes many psychological illnesses, and to sensory deprivation which leads to horrendous physical, emotional health problems. So while the prison officials are ostensibly trying to “protect” the transgender prisoners, many have argued that this is a wholly wrong-headed tactic because it simply exchanges one set of dangers for another. Some trans women, despite the obvious and pervasive dangers, prefer to be in the general population rather than try to survive the psychological terrors of solitary confinement. The film conclusively
demonstrates that this is most certainly not a viable solution for the gender segregation of prisons, nor does it address what to do with transgender inmates. The savagery of the current system is clearly portrayed in the film in a multitude of ways, urging the viewer to ask difficult and complex questions.35

One of the most pivotal questions raised in this film is the issue of health care. While some prisons will allow MTF inmates with a doctor’s prescription the ability to take hormones, most do not. This was evidenced by two stories in the film: Linda from Idaho and Ophelia from Virginia. Despite the fact that “gender identity disorder” is a diagnosis in the Diagnostic and Statistic Manual (Fourth Edition), many prison officials do not believe that transsexuality is a legitimate health condition that demands medical intervention. When Linda entered prison, one official told her that they did not treat transsexuals under any circumstances at their facility. He also told her that she would probably just end up killing herself anyway, like most transsexuals in prison have done. Linda went through a harrowing journey trying to demand hormone treatments for her medical care. In a boldly dramatic act to demand that she be given the hormones she desperately needed, she cut off her testicles and her penis while incarcerated.. The doctor informed her that she was close to having to use “a pee bag” for the rest of her life. In one of the film’s most dramatic scenes, Linda pulls down her skirt to reveal her self-surgery, with literally nothing left of her genitals except a small urethra to pass urine. I believe this is a good example of a new sort of representation when compared to the sensationalist portrayal in *Let Me Die a Woman*. Whereas in that film, a cisgender “expert” was pointing to the genitals of trans people, in *Cruel and Unusual*, Linda clearly utilized her own agency to reveal her body. The moment in the film was vitally
important because it clearly showed the depth of gender dysphoria on a person’s psyche. Rather than continue to live in a body marked by genitals that did not match her female identity, Linda took matters into her own hands, literally. Audiences are graphically shown the results of a prison system which does not give people the basic medical and psychological care that they deserve as human beings. In addition, financial rationales for denying transsexuals medical care do not hold up to scrutiny. The two trips to the emergency room were astronomically expensive, a cost the state had to absorb, and much more than paying for generic hormones each month. And yet, the prison would not buckle. They believed that they had to run the show, and that allowing prisoners to call the shots would undermine their total authority and power base. What was next, prison officials asked themselves, inmates demanding that they pay for sex reassignment surgery? Linda had the foresight to file a lawsuit to demand that trans women be allowed to have access to their hormone therapy while in prison, a suit that was successful and which changed policy in the state of Idaho.

Ophelia was also denied her hormones in Virginia. This caused her to develop a case of cutting and self-mutilation. Like Linda, she was disgusted by her testicles as the source of the testosterone coursing through her veins. She started to lacerate her testicles, which was documented in her medical records multiple times. Like Linda, Ophelia had to file a lawsuit to get the prison to administer her hormones, and she too was able to change the policy after a long fight. The prison basically called Ophelia mentally ill and stated that the lacerations on her scrotum were not related to her transgender identity.

Anna, the prisoner in Florida, was forced to go off her hormones “cold turkey.” She describes the physical and emotional effects as horrific, including hot flashes, breast
pains, headaches, vomiting, and severe depression. The totality of these symptoms caused Anna to try to commit suicide in her cell. After she had hung herself she fell on the floor unconscious and was not discovered for several hours. After watching these stories, I was horrified at the level of sadistic treatment. These trans women were basically treated like throwaway people, people in whom the system would not invest because they were just going to die soon, anyway. From brutal assaults and rapes, to placement in “the hole,” to the denial of urgent medical care, this film brilliantly proves its own central thesis: this is a horribly marginalized population which is being treated in a cruel and unusual manner. Sadly, their trans status, as well as their status as poor people, people of color, sex workers etc. combine to multiply oppress them in societal institutions, including the prison industrial complex.

One of the aspects of this film that I admire is that, despite the oppression, the subjects are not portrayed as victims, a theme echoed in Fenced Out and Toilet Training. Although they have been horrendously victimized by the system, they have also used their agency in ways to transform their own lives and those of their sisters. Seeing Linda and Ophelia file the lawsuits and help the lives of other trans prisoners, for instance, was both inspiring and empowering. Seeing Anna get out of prison and reconnect with her sister and son, and eventually get her own place was also wonderful. It was great to be introduced to Patty, a trans woman who gave shelter to Anna when she was released from prison. At the end of the film, Ashley talks about her dreams and what she wants out of life, as does Yolanda. The women, who have each been through such torture, still dare to dream. They still yearn for a better life and are going to fight to achieve it.
My major criticism of this film is that the problem of trans inmates could have been better balanced with more possible solutions. The film deftly portrays the inequities: the prison system and its gender segregation, the violence, the abuse, the lack of medical care etc. And while the lawsuits have helped to alleviate some of these, as an activist viewer I was left feeling: what more can we do? What can the non-incarcerated U.S. citizen do to help fight this gargantuan problem? Given the lack of knowledge about this area, the filmmakers fulfill a huge task by so brilliantly exposing us to the complexities and contours of the problem itself. The next step, some of which have been taken, is concrete action. I am confident that groups like the Sylvia Rivera Law Project and the Transgender, Gender Variant and Intersex (TGI) Justice Project can help to funnel the efforts of activists and social change agents towards positive transformation.37

**Ending in the Past: Screaming Queens and the Riot You Need to Know About**

Susan Stryker and Victor Silverman’s 2005 documentary *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton’s Cafeteria* is a fitting text on which to end this chapter. The documentary tells the story of mid 1960s San Francisco and the drag and transgender population in the Tenderloin neighborhood. In particular, it centers around Gene Compton’s Cafeteria, which was a Tenderloin coffee shop that was popular with drag queens, gay folks and transgender people. In the course of researching LGBT history in the city of San Francisco, including working for a time as the Executive Director of the GLBT Historical Society, Stryker discovered information in an old queer publication about a riot that occurred at Compton’s in 1966, a full three years before the Stonewall Riots. It is probably the first militant queer riot in the history of the U.S., and yet little to nothing was known about it. The film fills this dearth by showing the sites in the Bay
Area, talking to early drag and transgender pioneers, and using archival footage to show what dominant culture thought of queers, and what queer and trans folks thought of themselves.

The subjects of the film speak very positively and fondly of Compton’s Café, just as the queer/trans youth speak fondly of the Christopher Street Piers in *Fenced Out*. Although the story ends on a sadder note, the participants recall how important the café was to them. They refer to it as “fairy land,” “Oz” and how “fabulous” it was. Given the weight of pressures against drag queens and transgender people in the mid 1960s, Compton’s seemed to provide an oasis, a place of relative calm from the storm. The girls talk about how they would like seeing each other to know they had survived another night. Many were frequently harassed by the police and involved with street prostitution, often a very dangerous occupation. Felicia Elizondo\(^\text{38}\) discusses the dangers of living a transgender life and trying to survive economically in San Francisco’s often-mean streets. Despite these dangers, there was also a sense of excitement. People were finding the courage to be who they were, often at great costs. Compton’s seemed to provide a place of respite where the girls could come together and talk, support each other let off some steam. The documentary conveys this by including interviews with trans women who frequented Compton’s during its heyday. In addition, the film utilizes shot footage to try to re-create the special atmosphere that customers enjoyed while hanging out at Compton’s. In addition to the community forged through Compton’s, the trans women stayed together in a Tenderloin hotel named El Rosa, because many of the other hotels would not rent rooms to the transgender people. In addition, transgender persons could be picked up at any time and thrown in a police paddy wagon for the crime of so-called
“female impersonation.” Given the many strides we have made since the 1960s, it amazes me that what I take for granted was literally a criminal offense at one time in my own nation. It is utterly imperative, I think, for younger trans and gender-variant folks to see *Screaming Queens* to get a better idea of our history and from where we have come. In addition, Susan Stryker has written about the rebellion in a very accessible style in the book *Transgender History*.39 She writes that the riot was the first time “direct action in the streets by transgender people resulted in lasting institutional change” (64)

The 1960s was obviously a radically different time for LGBT people in the U.S. than are the years of this first decade of the 21st century.40 Although there were gay bars, they were often run by organized crime, and the police often took pay-offs to not bust them. Otherwise, surprise visits by police were common and included throwing people into the paddy wagon for the “crimes” of “cross dressing.” Transgender people were often the first targeted and worst treated. There was a law on the books in some places in the U.S. that a person had to be wearing at least three items of clothing that matched their physical sex. In *Screaming Queens*, Stryker defines the name “Tenderloin” as a vice-ridden district controlled by corrupt policemen.

The film interviews Alicia Brevard, who worked at the famous San Francisco drag club Finnochio’s.41 Working as a female impersonator was one of the few legal job opportunities open to transgender women at the time. Another of the women interviewed, Tamara Ching, mentions how the female impersonators were on a different level than the “gutter girls” and that they were “snobs.” They mention the problem of “payola,” including commentary by Elliot Blackstone,42 a police sergeant who worked in community policing to aid the gay and transsexual communities in San Francisco. In
addition, the transgender women featured discuss how they could be arrested at any time for female impersonation, a circumstance that also happened within Compton’s Cafeteria. Staff there would allegedly get frustrated when street queens would buy only a cup of coffee and stay at the café for hours and hours. In addition, the staff did not like the new queer political militants who started hanging out, including members of a queer rights group called Vanguard. Vanguard eventually picketed Compton’s for their harassment of members of the LGBT community. As Stryker notes in Transgender History:

“Vanguard, which formed in the summer of 1966, is the earliest known queer youth organization in the United States. Its name, which signaled members’ perception that they were the cutting edge of a new social movement, shows how seriously they took the ideals of radical democracy” (70).

One of the gems of the film is the integration of old, black-and-white footage of transgender women talking about their lives. Susan Stryker notes that this footage comes from a documentary only released on the midnight movie circuit entitled Gay San Francisco (1970, directed by Jonathan Prince.) That Stryker and Silverman were able to unearth the film is terrific as its presence augments the historical nature of the documentary. The presence of this footage helps to propel the viewer back in time to experience the world through a transgender woman’s eyes as she lived at that time. The footage includes a woman who discusses the perils of finding stable employment. She discusses how she tried to find work dressed as a man and was found to be not masculine enough. When she tried to work as a woman, eventually somebody would tip off her employer about her former name and biological sex. She became so frustrated that she decided it was easier to hit the street and hustle johns to make $100 in a night than try to
find work in the so-called straight world. The economic insecurity that the trans women face comes through loud and clear. Most jobs in the straight world are all but closed to them. Two of the few options are street prostitution and female impersonation, both of which had risks of their own. Stryker discusses a serial killer who targeted transsexuals during this time in the Tenderloin. He would slit their throats, ritualistically mutilate their genitals and dump their bodies in an alley. Other men would not know they were picking up a transgender prostitute and would go into a rage upon discovering that their “date” had male genitals, an issue which continues through to the present day. These trans sex workers would be beaten up and sometimes killed by their irate clients. One of the film’s main interview subjects, Amanda St. Jaymes, observes that trans women sold themselves both to make a living and to be loved. In the virulently transphobic and homophobic world of that time, sex work provided a way for trans women to receive a little bit of affection, not to mention provide economic survival. Some trans women drank alcohol and took drugs to make their difficult lives more bearable. The girls repeatedly state that they did what they did to survive. This includes carrying empty liquor bottles to use as a weapon if need be, or even transforming a high-heeled stiletto shoe into a formidable weapon. As one subject stated, in the Tenderloin, you either “kicked ass or you got your ass kicked.”

The film does an excellent job of contextualizing the rebellion in the historical epoch in which it occurred. Stryker’s narration discusses the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, the war on poverty and new government programs, the women’s movement and the burgeoning homophile movement with groups such as Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society. She discusses how gender became a form of politics,
with young men in love beads and long hair and young feminists wearing blue jeans to protest feminine beauty standards. They also discuss local activism and developments, including the lack of neighborhoods with affordable housing and the important activist work of Cecil Williams and the Glide Memorial Methodist Church. In addition, Stryker discusses the new availability of claiming a transsexual identity. This includes discussion of Christine Jorgensen as the first public and famous transsexual in the 1950s, as well as the pioneering work of Dr. Harry Benjamin, including the publication of his book *The Transsexual Phenomenon* in 1966. Finally, more street queens could go on hormones, get sex reassignment surgery, and begin new lives as women, rather than being trapped in a liminal space. Many discussed how they wanted to leave life on the streets in the Tenderloin behind and start life as a woman working in different professions.

As these different social and political movements developed, the stage was being set for the riot at Compton’s. As mentioned, Vanguard was a militant queer rights group that began to agitate for social change, including more respectable treatment at Compton’s Cafeteria. They led a picket line against Compton’s before the infamous riot happened. The story goes that on the night of the riot in August 1966, (we do not know the exact date) the police grabbed a queen and she threw coffee in the officer’s face. Soon, sugar shakers were flying through the air, as well as everything else that was not nailed down. About sixty customers fought back and broke the plate-glass windows of the joint. The fighting swelled out into the streets. The film utilizes both found footage as well as new footage shot expressly for the documentary. The use of black-and-white footage helps to propel the viewer back into time to identify with the actions of the righteously indignant queer and trans customers.
Little did they know at the time that they were changing the world in vitally important ways. St. Jaymes reports that after the riot there was a lot of joy. People undoubtedly felt good and empowered to have fought back against such wretched conditions. And, in fact, they contributed to a movement that is ongoing. In 1966, three years before the more-well known Stonewall Riot, queers and trans people fought back against injustice, humiliation and police brutality. After the riots, Compton’s never quite got its business back and it shut down in 1972, replaced by a porn shop. The Center for Special Problems was set up to aid transpeople and fight against repressive laws, and Elliot Blackstone served as an important ally for the San Francisco LGBT population. Curiously, San Francisco did not pass legislation banning discrimination on the basis of gender identity/expression until 1995. Despite an incredible amount of work on these issues in the Bay Area, the struggle continues.

I am happy to end with this film because it shows just how far we have come in terms of the transgender media canon’s progress. The many positive attributes of the film cannot be overstated; I would go so far as to call it revolutionary in terms of its unique representation. Firstly, transgender people are seen as complex human beings rather than as one-dimensional cardboard cutouts. While their oppression and victimization are clearly presented, they are not presented merely as victims but as complex people caught in the midst of a culture war. And as a transgender woman and activist, I watch Screaming Queens and feel pride, empowerment and hopefulness. In the face of so much adversity, trans women have not only survived, but worked to change the world. The sense of agency and activism is what is so awe-inspiring in the film. In addition, the gay/trans activism is not presented as though it happened in a vacuum. It is
placed within an economic, cultural and political context that helps viewers to make more sense of the time period in question. The intersectional identities of the subjects is something that is taken into consideration. Because the filmmaker (Stryker) is framed within the filmic narrative itself, the film is not pretending to be some completely “objective” document complete with an omniscient narrator who embodies some unknown universality or unique connection to unfettered “Truth.” By putting Stryker on screen, we are able to see the embodiment and identity of the filmmaker and her unique connection to the material. This gives the film a sense of what Jay Ruby calls “reflexivity.” History is not some politically-neutral, wholly discoverable entity just waiting to be discovered and documented. The film contributes to the understanding of historiography, how knowledge about the past is obtained, and how that history is then disseminated to other people. My recommendation would have been to push this even further. For although Stryker shares trans status with many of her interview subjects, she is also white, middle-class and an academic/researcher. How do these parts of her social location impact her relations to trans women of color who were/are sex workers? How was Stryker, as well as her co-producer Victor Silverman, received as academics and researchers given the history of such people vis-à-vis their less privileged, more oppressed subjects? It was great to see Stryker walking around town with the documentary subjects, and I would have liked more information on how she negotiated her own identity as a researcher and documentarian in terms of power relations and the production of knowledge. For, as mentioned at the beginning, documentary films necessarily involve an ethical component when a documentarian is capturing the lives of other people. Still, despite these questions, *Screaming Queens* breaks new ground in
terms of its representation of trans people, their history and their politics. We owe a huge debt to Stryker, Silverman and all of the people who shared their stories of survival and political protest in the creation of a more just world.

**From Victims to Revolutionaries**

Documentary film is an exciting genre for fresh representations of transgender people. For starters, documentary film has a rich tradition of tackling social justice issues and bringing topics to the forefront that are often rendered invisible by the dominant society. In addition, the digital revolution has changed the process of filmmaking. Now, more than at any other time in filmic history, equipment is more affordable and technical expertise is easier to learn. This means that populations that have been historically oppressed and kept out of the ranks of filmmaking now have greater access. Marginalized groups now have an easier time making films about their own group rather than more privileged people making films about them.

The fact that trans and gender-variant people were very much involved with the production of the films in this chapter is important at this historical juncture. This development is part of the overarching process of the decolonization of trans people. Just as we were once shackled to the policies of cissexual “experts” (psychiatrist, surgeons, lawyers, etc.), we now see a much greater number of trans-identified lawyers, doctors, counselors etc. In the same way, more trans people are now in a position to make films that speak to their own experience, and that challenge the limiting stereotypes and misinformation that we have been fed for decades. This is an important development that will potentially transform the types of images we will see emerge in the coming years.\(^{44}\)
To end this chapter, I would like to recap some of the attributes of The Transgender Revolutionary as depicted in these documentary films. Firstly, the issue of trans identity is taken for granted. There is not extended time spent in the films discussing what transgender is, the etiology of transsexualism, or its moral virtues. It is incredibly refreshing to see images of transpeople where these stale discourses are not repeated once again. The issue of why some people are transgender is over-examined and deeply problematic. These films are more interested in why transphobia exists, which is a much more important question.

These films also are not interested in being “procedurals,” i.e. explaining medical transition step-by-step and framing sex reassignment surgery as the epicenter of all trans people’s lives. While hormones, for instance, are discussed in *Cruel and Unusual*, it is not to laboriously chronicle their bodily effects, but to discuss how they are a human rights issue. For those who need them, hormones are a medical therapy every bit as legitimate as medication for high blood pressure or diabetes. The focus, then, becomes how the prisons denying them to inmates is a policy issue that furthers the perpetuation of institutional oppression of transpeople.

The Transgender Revolutionary is cognizant of cultural oppression and works to do something about it. They are change agents committed to challenging the status quo. From the queens’ rebellion at Compton’s Cafeteria, to trans women challenging the prison industrial complex through speaking up and filing lawsuits, to LGBT youth of color fighting police harassment and gentrification, to everyday transgender people demanding the right to “pee in peace,” all of these films capture a spirit of fighting back that is powerful, memorable and inspiring. Avoiding the image of the tragic victim or the
disappearing stealth transsexual, these films picture people who are proud of who they are, willing to be visible, and ready to change conditions to benefit not only themselves, but the next generation of gender-variant people.

The Transgender Revolutionary cares about building community. The older paradigm of transsexualism expected people to go stealth, move to a new community and avoid contact with other transsexuals. Needless to say, this had a devastating impact on transgender community formation. Since the 1990s, activism, the Internet and unprecedented visibility have merged to forge a much larger and more connected trans community. The folks in these films know that a sense of collectivity between trans people and allies is vital to do the work of changing the world. We see this in the incredible importance of the piers as a social space to bring folks together, we see it in folks working together to challenge the ubiquity of bathroom discrimination, and we see it in the community forged by the trans women in the Tenderloin, not only fighting back at the Compton’s Rebellion, but in the concern they have to take care of each other on the tough streets. When Linda changes the policy in Idaho for trans prisoners, she knows it is about more than simply being able to get her needed hormones; it is about making things better for the trans people around her and the trans people who will come after her.

The Transgender Revolutionary is aware of how important intersectionality is for successful trans social movements, including a consciousness of coalitional politics. The four films discussed in this chapter function to dislodge the dominant position of the white, middle-class, post-operative, male-to-female transsexual. In order for trans liberation movements to be successful, they cannot reproduce the errors of other movements (feminism, gay rights, etc.) in terms of privileging certain groups while
marginalizing other parts of the community. These films include axes of identity other than gender identity/sexual orientation including racial diversity, class differences and age, among others. Sex work and sex workers rights is also an important topic tackled in several of these films. In addition to an open acknowledgment and examination of multiple forms of difference, the coalitions formed are done so with an eye towards the forward movement and liberation of all people, rather than just minoritarian civil rights approaches to benefit people who are already relatively privileged. Issues such as restroom access, prisoner rights, gentrification and police harassment are issues that go beyond trans people alone; they are macro-level cultural issues that oppress huge numbers of people. Trans people have been on the vanguard of progressive social movements for centuries, as illustrated by Leslie Feinberg in *Transgender Warriors*. We can continue this trend in the new millennium, but only if we join together in innovative coalitions that are attentive to interlocking systems of domination.

Given the mediocre and downright awful images of trans people that abound in media culture, in many ways these films are like diamonds in the rough. Writing about the prevalence of stereotypes in trans documentaries, Gwen Smith writes:

> It isn't that I feel these documentaries serve no purpose. That said, education can always be better. Much of what is shown are stereotypes and clichés, and frankly, it is time that these clichés become a part of history. I would rather like to see a documentary where transgender people are not stereotypes, where people can see just how diverse we really are. I want to see that transgender people are not all Caucasian. I want to see transmen, I want to see gender queers, and I want to see others
who are just living their lives without a concern for genitals. I want to see transwomen and transmen defined by who they are, not by dated notions of gender. I want to see people called what they want to be called. In short, I want to see reality, not clichés.\textsuperscript{45}

But the more optimistic news is that the emergence of these revolutionary representations is continuing full steam ahead. And such momentum is desperately needed: there are still so many stories to tell.
1 For an article about this, please see the article: “Paris Has Burned” by Jesse Green. In the article, Livingston states “I'm white, yes, but I'm an openly queer, female director, and I can't think of anything more out of the mainstream. I'm sorry, but I do not think I have the same relationship to the ruling class as a straight man.” Livingston’s defensiveness does not conceal her inability to admit, much less transform, her own position of privilege vis-à-vis her subjects. We also learn that many more people in the ballroom community have died in another film about the House subculture entitled How Do I Look?, directed by Wolfgang Busch. For an in-depth discussion of the death of Dorian Corey, see: “The Drag Queen and the Mummy” by Edward Conlon. For info on the death of Willi Ninja, see: “Willi Ninja, 45, Self-Created Star Who Made Voguing Into an Art, Dies” by Lola Ogunnaike. The death of Octavia St. Laurent from cancer was announced in May 2009, making her the sixth of eight principals in the film Paris is Burning to pass away.

2 Dupree felt that he and many others were not adequately compensated for their appearance in the film, while Livingston reportedly made a good amount of money from it. Dupree also discussed the way that Madonna stole the art form of vogueing and made it look like her own creation. Through whitewashing and popularizing the art form, Madonna, in typical cultural vampirism fashion, made the song “Vogue” a worldwide hit but failed to acknowledge that the art form was born in Harlem and pioneered by Black and Latino gay, drag and trans communities.

3 bell hooks writes: “Too many reviewers and interviewers assume not only that there is no need to raise pressing critical questions about Livingston’s film, but act as though she somehow did this marginalized black gay subculture a favor by bringing their experience to a wider public. Such a stance obscures the substantial rewards she has received for this work” (153). hooks takes Livingston to task for her appropriation of Black gay life and her seemingly inability or refusal to interrogate her own position of privilege and dominance vis-à-vis her subjects. See: “Is Paris Burning?” by bell hooks.

4 Although What Sex Am I? has a problematic representation of gender-ambiguous people (the term genderqueer was not then in use) it should be noted that the film did indeed try to promote greater acceptance of MTF cross-dressers and transsexuals and FTM transsexual people. In many ways, it is a product of its time where more sophisticated understandings of gender were still not widely discussed. At that time, the transgender community was, at best, the TV/TS (Transvestite/Transsexual) community, and the true plurality of gender diversity was often not acknowledged or discussed in affirming ways. Thus, the gender-transgressive people whose bodies and identities blur the male/female binary are represented in What Sex Am I? as night creatures and as confused people.

5 For more on circus sideshows, including discussion of sexual ambiguity as a featured display, see: American Sideshow by Marc Hartzman; Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit by Robert Bogdan; Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination by Rachel Adams. Also, see the film Juggling Gender (Dir. Tami Gold) about the life of performance artist Jennifer Miller, a bearded woman who has fascinating views on sex and gender diversity.

6 I once again refer readers to the pioneering work of Dr. Joshua Gamson, who writes brilliantly about the entire spectrum of LGBT people in daytime, television talk shows in his book Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity.

7 One of the early films to explore the FTM body in terms of sexuality is Annie Sprinkle’s Linda/Les and Annie (1992). Described as a docu-porn, the film explores the sexual and romantic relationship between cissexual female Annie Sprinkle and Les Nichols, born Linda, a post-operative female-to-male transsexual. The graphic footage includes footage of Sprinkle and Les Nichols having sex with his newly constructed phallus. Christie Milliken discusses the film in-depth in her article “Unheimlich Maneuvers: The Genres and Genders of Transsexual Documentary.” Within the trans community, the film spawned considerable controversy because many saw it as exploitative and catering to shock values. More recently, trans man Luke Woodward produced the film Enough Man (2006) about the sexualities of a cross-section of FTM transgender and transsexual people. In the docu-porn tradition, it also includes both interviews and graphic footage of sexuality.

By discussing transnormativity, I am building on the work of Lisa Duggan, who utilizes the nomenclature of homonormativity in her book *The Twilight of Equality?*, whose basic premise is: “The Twilight of Equality? argues that neoliberalism has a shifting cultural politics that the progressive left must understand in order to constitute an effective opposition. But rather than focus on neoliberalism’s cultural project, sectors of progressive-left reproduce, within their own debates, liberalism’s rhetorical separation of economic/class politics from identity/cultural politics. This separation seriously disables political analysis and activism” (xxi).

It will be interesting to monitor the continued release of trans-produced documentaries and media texts to examine how, and if, they reproduce dominant cultural conceptions of sex, gender and sexuality and construct “transnormative” discourses that then pressure gender-variant people to buy into certain status quo or regressive ideologies. The lack of visible support Beatie received from mainstream trans organizations for his high profile media case may speak to their ambivalence about supporting a case that clearly pushes the boundaries of trans identity, gender politics and reproduction. Could Beatie cast a negative light on the “transgender community” because his actions so clearly violate what it means to be a man or a transsexual man? As more time passes, we will see whether the trans community, particularly activists, embrace those who push the cultural envelope or work to marginalize them in service of transnormative political strategizing.

The Standards of Care (SOC) refer to the non-binding protocols developed to aid clinicians in treating transpeople who desire hormones and/or surgery as part of their transition process. The original U.S. SOC were drafted by the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBIGDA) in 1979 and have undergone multiple revisions. HBIGDA changed its name to the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) in 2006. The SOC cover diagnosis of transsexualism, hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and sex reassignment surgery (SRS), as well as the Real Life Experience (RLE) previously known as the Real Life Test, the period when a person cross-lives prior to surgery. The SOC have come under scrutiny for their strictness and the way they perpetuate a gate-keeping system that makes it too difficult for transpeople to access the medical treatment they need. In addition, the SOC are geared towards transsexuals only and do not cover transgender people or genderqueer people who may wish to receive treatments that challenge notions of gender bipolarity.

*Let Me Die a Woman* is centered on Leo Wollman as the “expert” on trans people’s lives. In *What Sex Am I?* there are frequent interviews with doctors, psychologists and counselors—not to mention an omniscient narrator—to explain the trans experience to us. The Discovery Channel productions: *Changing Sexes: Male to Female* and *Changing Sexes: Female to Male* are good examples of the “procedural” model that focus on physical/medical transition and traditional trajectories of transsexualism.

This controversy has been meticulously documented by Lynn Conway on her website. See: [http://ai.eecs.umich.edu/people/conway/TS/LynnsReviewOfBaileysBook.html](http://ai.eecs.umich.edu/people/conway/TS/LynnsReviewOfBaileysBook.html)

“Trapped in the wrong body” has long been used as a discourse to explain the feelings of “gender dysphoria,” of inhabiting a body that does not conform to one’s internal, core gender identity. However, the phrase is trite and crude and removes the personal experience from the cultural experience. Gender activist Riki Wilchins was quoted as saying that she does not know anyone trapped in the wrong body, but knows lots of people trapped in the wrong culture. Trapped in the wrong body is often a nomenclature used by transpeople to describe their experience to cissexual people who are very unacquainted with transgender issues. However, as a descriptor, its reductionistic and essentializing connotations are insidious and best avoided.

Since its production, there has been a move in New York to better accommodate the needs of homeless LGBT youth. At least three homeless shelters now primarily serve this community: The Ali Forney Center, Sylvia’s Place and Carmen’s Place in Queens. However, they often struggle financially to stay afloat and provide the needed services since the need is very acute. For an excellent book that looks at “at-risk” gay youth of color in New York, see: *Drifting Toward Love: Black, Brown, Gay, and Coming of Age on the Streets of New York* by Kai Wright.
influence of mass media and involving people in the process of making media is mandatory for our long-term goal of information equity.” For more info, visit: http://papertiger.org/

17 “The Neutral Zone is the first drop-in center designated specifically for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) homeless and at-risk youth. Our mission is to create a network of support, safety and service provision for disenfranchised LGBTQ runaway and homeless adolescents and young adults by offering sanctuary, basic needs, positive alternatives, and programming designed to enhance the future of each youth member.” Website: http://www.greenwichvillageyouthcouncil.net/neutralzone/

18 FIERCE! stands for Fabulous Independent Educated Radicals for Community Empowerment. It is a group by and for LGBT youth of color. On their website it notes that FIERCE develops “politically conscious leaders who are invested in improving ourselves and our communities through youth-led campaigns, leadership development programs, and cultural expression through arts and media. FIERCE is dedicated to cultivating the next generation of social justice movement leaders who are dedicated to ending all forms of oppression.” FIERCE has truly led the campaign chronicled in Fenced Out to fight police harassment, gentrification, poverty and bigotry.

19 GRIOT Circle is a New York City group designed for the support of LGBT Elders, particularly LGBT Elders of Color. Regina Shavers founded GRIOT Circle in 1995 due to the isolation she felt as an elderly lesbian of African descent. Griot is the word for a storyteller in West Africa who passes on the history of a community. For more information on GRIOT Circle, see their website at: http://www.griotcircle.org/layout.htm

20 Willi Ninja (born 1961) was a self-taught dancer born and raised in New York City. He rose to prominence through his contributions to the art form known as vogueing. Although Ninja did not create the dance form, his work brought it to a world-renowned level of expertise. Ninja came up through the ball system documented in the films Paris is Burning and How Do I Look? and was Mother of the House of Ninja. Ninja was a dancer and choreographer in music videos who made television appearances and recorded his own music. He died of complications from AIDS at age 45 in 2006.

21 The advocacy of FIERCE continues. In The New York Times (3/13/09) article “At A Pier to be Redone, Gay Youth Seek a Haven” Joseph Huff-Hannon discusses how FIERCE and Urban Justice Center are demanding that plans for the Piers include the construction of a 24-hour youth center. “Such a center, they hope, would offer services like job training, transitional housing, recreation and safe space.” The groups have faced an uphill battle against the Trust, particularly in the current economic crisis and climate of massive budget cuts.

22 This quote is taken from the excellent article “Sylvia and Sylvia’s Children: A Battle for a Queer Public Space” by Benjamin Shepard. In this article, Shepard discusses the life and legacy of Sylvia Rivera, and then the struggle of “Sylvia’s Children” to maintain queer public space on the Piers in the Village. “Sylvia Rivera struggled for over thirty years to force the city to accept and protect the right of transgender people to walk or work in public space. In many ways, the youth who continue to struggle for queer spaces are working from the same vantage point. Queer space is about creating room for the spectacle of difference as opposed to assimilating sameness. As long as autonomous zones pop up, the possibility remains” (111).


27 The article “Calling All Restroom Revolutionaries!” by Simone Chess, Alison Kafer, Jessi Quizar and Mattie Richardson describes the efforts of their group PISSAR (People In Search of Safe and Accessible Restrooms) to create accessible restrooms for gender-variant people and people with disabilities.

“Bathroom access is, from the onset, a multi-identity endeavor. It has the potential to bring together feminists, trans folks, people with disabilities, single parents, and a variety of other people whose bathroom needs frequently go unmet” (192). They also describe their bathroom activism, which involves using a
checklist to document the state of bathrooms on their campus (UC Santa Barbara) and meeting with the chancellor and his advisors to discuss making bathrooms more accessible for all.

28 For more on Spade's arrest and the subsequent restroom activism, see the interview with Dean Spade in Maximum Rock and Roll conducted by Mimi Nguyen, available at: http://www.srlp.org/files/documents/toolkit/interview.pdf

29 One of the strengths of gender neutral restrooms is that they create greater access for multiple groups of people: gender variant folks, disabled people with a personal care attendant of a different gender, parents taking care of and diaper-changing a child of a different gender, opposite-sex adult children who may need to attend to their elderly parent in the restroom, privacy for religiously-based feet washing etc. Gender-neutral restrooms are a win-win situation for multiple groups of people in U.S. society. PISSAR also stresses the importance of being attentive to the availability of pads and tampons in public restrooms for menstruating people. For this reason, it is important that the gender-neutral restroom not be re-termed "transgender bathrooms." Their use is of wider scope than simply giving access to trans and genderqueer folks. In addition, many transgender people may opt to use the restroom consistent with their gender identity and not the gender-neutral restroom. All persons should be allowed to "pee in peace." For an additional resource on trans restroom access, see: "Peeing in Peace: A Resource Guide for Transgender Activists and Allies. San Francisco: The Transgender Law Center, 2005. http://www.transgernderlawcenter.org/pdf/PIP%20Resource%20Guide.pdf

30 I would like to remind readers that at one time in the United States, many bathrooms were segregated on the basis of race under Jim Crow segregation. Laws were passed that outlawed this despicable practice and many people today look back at the practice with puzzlement: how could we enforce such an unjust system? Many will state that the sexual segregation is "just different" from racial segregation or that there are "fundamental differences" between men and women. Didn’t they also assert that there were "fundamental differences" between “whites” and “coloreds” when they tried to enforce racial segregation?

31 An important breakthrough happened in New York City when Asian American transgender activist Pauline Park filed a complaint with the Commission for Human Rights. After using a women’s restroom in a Manhattan mall, she was harassed and asked for ID by members of the Advantage security team. She won the complaint and the Commission ruled that trans people can use the bathroom that is consistent with the gender they inhabit, regardless of biological sex. It is only through people like Park courageously standing up for their rights that we will see genuine socio-cultural transformation. For more on this story, see: Confessore, Nicholas. “Transgender Group Reaches Agreement on Restrooms.” The New York Times. April 2, 2005. Online at: http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E04E3DC113FF931A35757C0A9639C8B63


33 This is not the first time a trans woman has been sexually abused by Florida guards. Christine Madrazo, a trans woman from Mexico who sought asylum in the U.S. was raped twice while in an immigration detention center in Miami, Florida. See: “Trans/Migrant: Christina Madrazo’s All-American Story” by Alisa Solomon. Contained in: Luibheid, Eithne and Lionel Cantú, Jr., Editors. Queer Migrations: Sexuality, U.S. Citizenship, and Border Crossings. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.


35 For an excellent overview of the sadistic and cruel nature of solitary confinement in prisons, see the article “Hellhole” by Atul Gawande. Although the author does not mention trans prisoners in particular, he does discuss the physical, mental and social effects of this barbaric practice on prisoners’ lives, as well as the history of the practice in the U.S.

36 Even as a self-identified transgender activist and scholar, I am ashamed to say how little I have learned over the years about the lives of trans women in men’s prisons. This, of course, is not an accident. The
mainstream trans movement, and gay assimilationist movement, has not taken up trans/queer prisoner rights as a central organizing issue. This follows dominant society, where all too often prisoners are forgotten about by those living their lives on the “outside.” One exception to this was the book I read about the experiences of a transsexual woman placed in a men’s prison in Canada (*Prisoner of Gender: A Transsexual in the System* by Stephanie Castle.) In addition, back in the 1990s, I do remember some of the tabloid-esque talk shows like *The Sally Jessy Raphael Show* doing programs about the lives of transsexual women in prison. Although sensationalized and done for ratings, at least the issues were being talked about publicly. Now, I rarely see much mainstream media visibility about the plight of transgender prisoners.


38 Elizondo, now in her early 60s, had sex reassignment surgery in 1974. She was diagnosed with HIV in 1987, and has worked as an AIDS activist in addition to being a transgender pioneer. Elizondo, who married nine times, also performs as a female impersonator named Felicia Flames. Elizondo also appears in the documentary *Felicia*, which chronicles her resolve to survive as a single trans senior living in San Francisco on a limited income. (2008, 8 minutes. Directed by Tim O’Hara.)

39 Stryker discusses the riot in detail, discussing not only the specific incident at Compton’s, but the socio-cultural conditions that surrounded this militant action, e.g. the location of the Tenderloin, the situation of police brutality, the escalating situation in Vietnam, urban renewal and development, and the organizing of new activist collectives. For more, please see Susan Stryker’s *Transgender History*, p. 63-75.

40 A representation that helps viewers see dominant conceptualizations of gay men in the 1960s is the CBS Reports *The Homosexuals*, hosted by Mike Wallace (1967). This dreary television news documentary presents people from the queer community as diseased, lonely and tragic. It features shrinks like notorious Charles Socarides spreading his notion that homosexuality is a mental disorder. The five gay men interviewed have their image in shadow or behind a potted plant. If this demonstrates how little knowledge there was of homosexuality, it goes without saying that even less was known about transsexuality. The trans women interviewed in *Screaming Queens* had to be incredibly perseverant and resilient just to survive such an incredibly hostile and punitive climate.

41 For more on Brevard’s story, read her educational and inspiring autobiography: Brevard, Alicia. *The Woman I Was Not Born To Be*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001. It was wonderful that Silverman and Stryker sought out Brevard for her participation in the documentary, because it further documents her life. Her history, as someone who transitioned early in the U.S., is vitally important to capture and learn from.

42 Elliot Blackstone is a pioneer in terms of building bridges between the LGBT community and the police department. Blackstone, a heterosexual man, worked with a variety of LGBT advocacy groups to improve their lives and promote positive relations between them and the police. A leader in what has come to be known as community policing, Blackstone’s role in the forward motion of the San Francisco LGBT community is significant. Blackstone died in 2006 at the age of 81, just a year after the release of *Screaming Queens*.

43 In a personal email communication, Susan Stryker wrote to me about the footage used for the riot scene in *Screaming Queens*. “The cafeteria footage came from a variety of sources: the exteriors of 101 Taylor when it was Compton’s are also from *Gay San Francisco*--the drive-by and the queens walking in from the sidewalk. The still of it as a porn palace is from the San Francisco History Collection at San Francisco Public Library. The contemporary exteriors we shot. Interior still of gender-diverse people sitting at tables is from the Henre LeLeu Collection at the GLBT Historical Society. Interior footage was a mix of commercial stock footage (shot in LA, mid-1960s), stuff we shot at a Mel's diner on Van Ness Avenue during business hours, and the ‘riot recreation’ which was shot at a place on Geary called "Nick's Olympic Flame," which we rented for the night.” Stryker, Susan. Personal Email Communication. 25 April 2009.

44 However, I do want to make it clear that I am not making an essentialist argument here. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, I do not believe that only transgender people should make films about other
transgender people. In fact, there are some excellent films made by cissexual persons that explore trans themes. I think we must assess films on a case-by-case basis and critique them where appropriate for perpetuating stereotypes, misinformation, sensationalism and transphobia. However, since trans people making cultural productions about other trans people (or themselves) is still relatively new, I do think we will see some innovative representations emerge. However, as this trend continues, I also believe we will see transpeople who will start to follow the money trail and produce images which “sell” to the dominant population, cashing in our apparent trendiness, but in the meantime do our a community a disservice politically and culturally. Thus, the relationships between art, social location, audience and consumer capitalism are thorny and complicated.

45 Gwen’s Smith essay is entitled “The Transgender Documentary Drinking Game.” In this humorous work, Smith encourages readers to take a drink every time they see a certain stereotype or cliché represented in a given transgender documentary. Smith lists many stereotypes endemic to trans documentary films, such as the lack of people of color, the assumption that genitals equals gender, transphobic family members, hand-wringing “experts” and many more.
CHAPTER SIX:
TRANS MEDIA FUTURES: ACTIVISM, GENDER MULTIPLICITY AND HUMAN LIBERATION

In this final chapter, I would like to begin by highlighting the primary findings of this dissertation. Next, I explore one of the central tensions in this project: postmodernism, queer theory and analyzing the circulation of media texts. I examine what I mean by the political and a progressive recasting of gender in both media and culture. Finally, I reflect upon the activist and political ramifications of trans media representations, and how the future of media can enhance not only trans liberation, but also the production of more emancipatory frameworks for the entire human family. The changing face of technology and trans media production will have an impact upon gender constructions and the possibilities of sexual subversion and the production of radical new paradigms for human beings in the social realm.

Chapters Two through Five have examined recurring tropes in the transgender media canon. These cultural codes, or master texts, are multiply occurring mediated constructs that frame transgender or gender-variant characters in particular, often limited, ways. The Deceiver, Mammy and Monster position the gender-variant characters primarily in relation to themes of duplicity, servility and psychosis. Needless to say, these cultural codes enclose the trans subject in ways that resonate with the already circulating discourses of a heterosexist, transphobic, patriarchal culture. Through close readings of over a dozen texts in the “reel world,” I have aimed to demonstrate how these recurring tropes re-present gender variance, and speculated about how these images affect spectators in the “real world.” However, this study is not designed as a reception study.
It is a cultural studies work that is interested in situating mediated transgender images within the cultural framework to reflect upon on how images potentially relate to the production and circulation of transphobic ideology. To explore this transphobia, I would like to revisit some of my findings in Chapters Two through Four.

Presenting trans people as deceivers encourages cisgender people to view the trans community as lying and duplicitous. The cross-dressing capers I examine in Chapter Two render gender transformation as motivated by selfish self-interest rather than serious self-exploration. They make gender crossing into a silly, comedic experience that is totally unrelated to real-world transgender lives. In addition, the trope of deception furthers the notion that there are “real” and “fake” gender expressions. The transgender body is cast as automatically counterfeit because the outward signifiers of gender do not “match” the topography of the subject’s body. The motif of the Transgender Deceiver functions to replicate hegemonic cultural ideologies which insist upon an intelligible congruency between sexed embodiment, gender expression, gender attribution and erotic object choice. While cracks in this system might be funny temporarily, most media repairs any and all fissures to reassure viewers of the supposed stability, universality and naturalness of heterosexual, gender-normativity.

The Transgender Mammy fits with the framing of other minority groups and women for the ways in which the trope positions gender-variant people as a subordinated, though perhaps helpful, class of people. Since trans people are cast as inferior within patriarchy, the mammy stereotype helps to resurrect them as having some worth by making them loyal best pals and comforting helpmates to the cissexual majority. By fixing the problems of those in power, their existence becomes slightly more bearable to
those who generally find them repulsive, crazy or frightening. In addition, the trans
person’s “colorful” life is exploited for the self-interests of those struggling with the
apparent dullness of heterosexual life. The Transgender Mammy is self-abnegating and
more concerned with helping her cisgender, heterosexual counterparts than herself or
people from her own queer/trans communities. While perhaps less insidious than the
deceiver or the monster, the mammy produces an image of the transfeminine subject akin
to a clown or cartoon character: larger-than-life, fantastical and bearing little resemblance
to actual, multifaceted human beings.

If the Transgender Mammy is almost angelic, the Transgender Monster is her
demonic sister. Starting with Norman Bates in Psycho through TransAmerican Killer,
the psychotic murderer in “gender distress” has proved to be a box-office staple. The
trope of the Transgender Monster capitalizes on the fear and terror that many people have
of those who stray too far from the conventions of gender and sexuality. Slasher films
render the gender nonconforming body as, in and of itself, horrific and terrifying. Like
the previous mixture between animal and human that provoked fear among viewers, the
gender hybridity exemplified by the trans killer is equally blood-curdling. The
Transgender Monster is a durable, reel-world cultural code that may bleed into
perceptions of gender-variant people in the real world. More importantly, slasher films
perform a patriarchal reversal by churning out images of trans killers while practically
ignoring the epidemic of violence in which trans people are killed and victimized.

Further, what are the possible outcomes for bending the rules of gender in the reel world?
While the films are meant to be entertainment and not didactic, how do the cultural
messages encoded in the film combine with already circulating discourses that present trans people as disordered, pathological and dangerous?²

The set of cultural codes examined in Chapters Two through Five contribute to a genderist culture. They do not create that culture, and they are certainly not the only contributing ingredients to the perpetuation of that culture. In addition, even the most overtly bigoted of representations can be contested and resisted, and images can be read against the grain to proffer alternate meanings. Transphobic media images are one variable that contribute to the ways in which trans people are framed in the real world. In addition, media in a genderist culture often condone, normalize or even encourage transphobia, as well as misogyny and heterosexism. Obviously, all of these phenomena are always already circulating throughout the entire culture. All of the major institutions, like the educational system, the church and the government are rife with genderism and patriarchal oppression. Mass media, however, is an important “cultural nexus” that harbors oppressive ideologies and contributes to the dissemination of hegemonic discourses that are already ubiquitous throughout our society.

I define “genderism” as a dichotomous vision of humanity that perpetuates the supremacy, universality and binary construction of masculine, heterosexual maleness, on the one hand, and feminine, heterosexual femaleness, on the other. In a genderist society, gender, or most aspects of it, are seen as essential, fixed entities that are inevitably tied to biology rather than to culture. Genderism promotes the idea of two, and only two, sexes/genders and does not draw a distinction between sexed embodiments and culturally communicated genders. In a genderist culture, most people not only believe that there are only two genders, but that there should only be two genders. Exceptions to gender
bipolarity are cast as jokes, aberrations or as caused by mental illness. Genderism is reflected in and constructed through mass media texts and transmitted to society, though it is sometimes resisted and subverted.³

**Cultural Studies Tensions**

Cultural Studies stresses the polysemic nature of texts, and the possibility and probability of multiple readings of texts. Stuart Hall, for example, has theorized the possibility of dominant readings, negotiated readings and oppositional readings.⁴ Due to my radical and revolutionary political commitments, it has often been hard for me to see the possibilities of more subversive readings of these media texts, or to see the pleasure that audiences may partake in viewing them. Although I think Hall’s paradigm is useful for beginning to think about a more complex reader response to media texts, I have stressed dominant readings in this dissertation to uncover hegemonic ideology and how this potentially circulates throughout society.

Given the genderism and transphobia that surrounds me in this culture, I do feel a strong political commitment to expose these prejudices within the media culture. While some readers might suggest that my readings of texts are too narrow, it is important to reiterate that trans media studies is a relatively new area of inquiry. There are not massive amounts of analytic texts examining the treatment of gender-variant people in film, television and media. I believe early criticism tends to focus on identifying and exposing patterns of cultural inequality. Later research may see alternate readings, explore pleasures in the text or argue for more nuanced analyses. This study, it should be noted, is unapologetically political and very much based in an activist agenda. As an activist, I try to utilize my scholarship to promote social change and cultural
transformation. I believe that as the field grows, there will be more and more studies to emerge that have different politics, methods, disciplines and styles.\(^5\)

I am hopeful that future scholars will analyze these media texts, adding new layers to the understanding of their content, their circulation, and their complicated relationship to the culture in which we live. In addition, I also look forward to studies that pay more attention to trans-identified viewers of trans media. Most of this project has centered on cissexual viewers of trans media, and that generally creates a different relationship to the text under review. Additional studies will continue to explore different audiences, reception theory, pleasures of the text, and diverse types of critical theory, along with many other related topics. Next, I would like to look at queer theory and its relation to this project.

**Queer Theory and Socio-Cultural Transformation**

As with cultural studies, I have a somewhat tense relationship with queer theory in this dissertation project. On the one hand, I find the readings of gender and sexuality that have come out of queer theory to be often useful for the ways in which they describe the embeddedness of these phenomena in society and culture. As a person committed to anti-essentialist understandings of gender and sexuality, queer theory creates a dynamic vision for how to talk and write about LGBT identities within a particular socio-cultural framework. Queer theory allows for a deep understanding of social constructionism and how it relates to the production and maintenance of particular subjectivities and dyadic relationships within our society. However, I struggle to utilize the critical school of queer theory to advance understandings of grass-roots activism and efforts for liberation and social justice.
It should be clear to readers of this dissertation that the trans body is a site of both discursivity and materiality. Queer theory has done a good job of explicating the discursivity of the gay/lesbian/trans body, and proffering theories for understanding how language functions to produce subjectivities. However, queer theory has often come under fire for its failure, inability or refusal to take on the body as a site of materiality. It is important to me to demonstrate in this work that real-world trans bodies are on the line, and not just figuratively. The very blood, skin, and bone of trans bodies is constantly subjected to the dangers of a genderist society, replete with vicious methods of policing, disciplining and punishing gender and sexual transgressions, often with the support of the nation state.

Amongst the crimes that haunt this analysis are homicides directed against trans women of color, as well as all hate-motivated violence against gender-variant people. Is queer theory adequately covering the intersections of race, trans/gender, poverty and sex work? In general, the answer is no. Just as second wave feminism cast the subject of its purview as white, middle-class, cissexual, able-bodied “woman” so too has queer theory centered the experiences of white, middle-class, cissexual, able-bodied gay men and lesbians. The absence, erasure and marginalization of people of color, trans and gender nonconforming people, people with disabilities and poor and working-class queers is an ongoing and serious problem in the field.

In addition, those who are looking at theoretical analyses to inform their political work, often find that queer theory comes up short. How, and to what degree, does queer theory as a field encourage or explicate grass-roots political activist interventions? And
more specifically for this project, how can we produce media, or engage with media culture, in ways that promote our activist political agendas?

In his book *Queer Theory and Social Change*, Max Kirsch writes about the tension between queer theory and political activism for social justice and cultural transformation. His cogent analyses expose queer theory for the ways in which it has utterly failed to deploy its often incoherent and post-structuralist jargon in the service of tangible, grass-roots efforts for social justice. With its emphasis on the deconstruction of coherent identity, and its focus on the pleasures and agency of the individual, it has not succeeded in encouraging a communal politics of resistance to heterosexism and transphobia. Kirsch notes that the deconstruction of identity politics has served as a roadblock to constructive political activism. An incredible amount of time has been invested in debating the merits of certain identity terms and socio-cultural categorizations. Great effort has been expended to interrogate the limits of language and how peoples’ unique qualities are concealed by identifying with labels that purport to represent incredibly heterogeneous groups of people. Due to this distrust of communal politics and skepticism towards collective identificatory practices, Kirsch has noted that queer theory has advocated narratives that stress the individual much more than it stresses group identity. Unfortunately, this has had a deleterious effect on collective organizing and communal activism for trans, bi and queer rights.

In addition, while queer theory encourages the evacuation of subjectivity in academia, certain gay rights groups continue to push neo-liberal attempts to normalize and assimilate the “gay” or “lesbian” subject rather than encourage a wider scale questioning of hegemonic structures of gender and sexuality. For example, many gay
and lesbian organizations (like the notorious Human Rights Campaign7) have been consumed with issues of the military (“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”) and gay marriage equality, issues that are incompatible with a more radical politics of liberation. As Kirsch writes:

If we recognize that the oppression of queer peoples is part of a larger exploitation of human beings, which includes modes of colonialism and xenophobia, can we consistently believe that participation in the very military, for example, that enforces this oppression is an objectively reasonable goal? If we recognize that marriage is primarily a failed institution in the culture at large, which focuses the energy of individuals on an unachievable ideal, can we comfortably claim that this is a progressive goal of social change? Does it make sense, in the face of these circumstances, to disengage? (73).

Taking queer theory superstar Judith Butler to task for her reluctance to explicate progressive queer political agendas and activist programs for social justice, Kirsch sees her writings as part and parcel of the larger problem of queer theory’s failure to engage productively with “the political.” While I certainly think that Butler is progressive and committed to social change, it is often difficult to tease out concrete possibilities for transforming the status quo from her dense, philosophical prose. As Leslie Feinberg has written in Transgender Warriors, “Today, a great deal of ‘gender theory’ is abstracted from human experience. But if theory is not the crystallized resin of experience, it ceases to be a guide to action” (xiii). My emphasis on activism and reading hegemonic culture in a more decisive way is decidedly out of style in terms of postmodern trends in the
academy, which often emphasize relativity, equivocation and ambivalence. As Kirsch writes: “While race, sex, gender, and class have become buzzwords in the university setting, it is infinitely less dangerous to use them within the context of theory than it is to take on the foundations of the larger socio-political structure. Similarly, it is certainly safer to deconstruct theories of social being than to construct modes of social action” (31). Following Kirsch’s challenge to construct modes of potential activism, I would now like to discuss my notion of politics and the need for media to forward a progressive vision of gender and sexuality.

**Politics and a Progressive Reading of Gender and Sexuality**

While I agree that postmodernism’s relationship to “the political” is vexed, I do not agree with those that would label postmodernism as apolitical in a totalizing way. In fact, one way of reading postmodernism is more about making the “political” transparent and acknowledging the political nature of all texts and discourses. The films I analyze in this dissertation are political. Often, the political ideologies in these filmic and televisual texts are conservative or even reactionary. My goal is to interrogate these status quo-preserving gender and sexual politics and suggest more progressive, radical or revolutionary alternatives.

Returning to my own autobiography, activism, particularly grass-roots activism, greatly influences what I mean by politics. My definition of politics is certainly not bound by conventional notions of governmentality. As Gordon Bailey and Noga Gayle write:

> The idea of politics, or of what is deemed political, has to be understood in a very different way than usual. It has to range far beyond the standard
meaning of ballot-box politics or of people working on our behalf in a legislature or government. What we consider to be political turns on a wider understanding of power, particularly of power as a political dynamic… To see politics as a ubiquitous phenomenon extends both our perceptions and our possibilities for acting, thinking, and living within our communities. (69-70)

My definition of politics is an understanding of the oppressive, embedded power relations of everyday life and a concomitant desire to change those power relations. Within the realm of this project and textual analysis, politics is the need to closely examine how gender and sexuality are written into the realm of images, and how these images often function to defend, reinscribe and perpetuate status quo power relations under the system of patriarchy. In addition, my definition of politics seeks to go further in that recognizing the problem is not enough. Inherent in a progressive political discourse is the desire for change, and the proffering of possibilities for recasting the status quo in order to promote social transformation. Writing about the work of cultural critic bell hooks, Cynthia Carter writes: “It is her commitment to revolutionary change that has convinced her that radical critics cannot opt only to comment from the academic sidelines, but also must engage with everyday popular culture and talk about people outside the academy in ways that might potentially lead to radical social change” (217). Like hooks, I believe that reform and band-aid solutions are not enough; only radical and revolutionary political interventions will truly begin to challenge the severe oppression of transgender people in American culture. As Carter writes:

Changing perspective necessitates public acknowledgement in the USA
that media imagery is ideological. Since there has long been resistance to accepting this point, hooks has felt that the only way to get people to listen to her arguments is to provide ‘fierce critical interrogation’ of media forms, practices and audience consumption (218).

Sometimes one must fight fire with fire. My passionate analysis of these media texts, my “fierce critical interrogation,” is based on my knowledge of how entrenched misogyny, heterosexism and transphobia are in this culture. To call out the formidable, oppressive weight of these problems often requires the risk of “going too far” to pierce through the walls of passivity, denial and resistance.

Central to my definition of politics is that domination in capitalist society exists, and that this domination must be confronted head-on through speaking truth to power and fomenting activist interventions. As Kirsch writes: “Resistance to capitalism, then, involves practical struggles on issues that affect all of us on an everyday basis. We cannot pretend to disengage from the reality of discrimination or oppression and claim that we are fulfilling a task of resistance by refusing to engage the domination that exists” (72). A large part of this project is confronting the way that gender structures dominate society, and the circulation of transphobic ideology as a key preserver of patriarchy. The next section seeks to move beyond this model by seeking to replace it with a more liberatory paradigm.

**From Genderism to Gender Multiplicity**

One of the strengths of feminist and critical queer theory has been the call for a new paradigm of gender and sexuality. Transgender theories and activist movements have advocated a “big tent” approach where all forms of gender diversity and multiple
trans identities (e.g. transsexuals, cross-dressers, androgynes, genderqueers, third gender, drag kings and queens etc.) are honored and validated. In particular, some streams of feminist, queer and trans theory have done an excellent job of critiquing and challenging the death grip of the gender binary. Through exposing the fictive nature of universal gender dimorphism, these critical schools have helped to advocate for an explosion of gender and sexual possibilities, and this I see as an extremely important and potentially radical component of contemporary feminism, queer theory and transgender studies.

As mentioned, a genderist world is devoted to shutting down gender and sexual possibilities beyond the usual binaries of male/female, gay/straight and masculine/feminine. To counter this, we need to assert the usefulness of gender multiplicity, and of promoting activisms that exponentially multiply gender so that the binaristic system of oppression is challenged and deemed as unacceptable to accommodate the diversity of gender expression.

In an interview with Bryan Fruth and Frances Guilfoyle, Sandy Stone comments directly on the theoretical concept of multiplicity:

I see multiplicity as opening up specific but infinite positions within a field of discourse of identity and discourse of subjectivity. And allowing for that spectrum means finding a new way to see and a new way to speak, because we don’t have a language in which multiplicity is possible. Our visual apparatus has not been trained culturally to see multiplicity when we’re confronted with it. So making multiplicity implies making multiplicity visible and palpable, and that means acts of language and acts of consciousness (45, emphasis mine).
In a genderist world, we are daily confronted with the ubiquity of gender and sexual dimorphism. Gender bipolarity is beat into us in an almost pathological fashion, in a powerful system of indoctrination that occurs from cradle to grave. Although this system is resisted and challenged, it is not done so on a massive scale. Mass media technologies, with their ability to reach thousands or even millions of people, have the potential for transmitting images of gender variance that are transformative, but as this dissertation shows, the media has mostly produced and transmitted images which do not challenge the status quo and that reassure viewers of their own sex-gender “normalcy” through maintaining hegemonic socio-cultural subjectivities.

Part of Stone’s challenge lies in “finding a new way to see.” The media I have discussed in Chapters Two through Four consistently offer an either/or vision of gender, even as it supposedly engages with gender variance. We need to see more “both/and” types of gender identities and expressions, and to challenge media viewers to move beyond black-or-white understandings of sex, gender and desire. Making multiplicity visible certainly involves acts of media production, as well as gender queer socio-cultural, artistic and political interventions in all of the “ideological state apparatuses,” as Louis Althusser terms them. These “acts of language and acts of consciousness” can assault notions of sex-gender purity, and forward a revolutionary platform of exponentially-multiplied genders and acts of sexual subversion.

Some see a tension between a strong commitment to analyzing and deconstructing gender dimorphism with providing the necessary resources to the most marginalized and disenfranchised transgender people. Namaste, for example, critiques the revolutionary gender politics articulated by many in U.S. academic and activist circles. It is worth
quoting her at length to articulate her position of rejection of these theories in *Sex Change, Social Change*:

To state that one is neither a man nor a woman, or that one is a third gender, or that gender is only a social construct so one is, in fact, nothing, ignores the very fundamental reality of being in the world. Yes, we can state that we are not men and not women when all is well in the world. But would someone please tell me how to get an apartment when one is neither a man nor a woman? Where does one find a physician to treat neither men nor women? And an employer? My point is that this transgendered discourse is utopic, and one profoundly informed by privilege: it assumes that one already has a job, housing, and access to health care. When all of these things are in place, then it is perhaps possible to move through the world in some kind of genderless state, or some state beyond gender. But when one of these very fundamental life elements is not in place, the imperative of gender becomes most apparent (22).

As mentioned earlier, the materiality of the trans body, in addition to its discursivity, is incredibly important to me. Thus, I share Namaste’s critical attention to material issues that affect trans survival, such as employment, health care, economic empowerment, housing and physical safety. Queer theory, and some transgender studies have not been attentive enough to these issues. However, I believe that Namaste’s position forces a false binary between queer and trans “utopic” theorizing, on the one hand, and the “reality of being in the world” on the other. Genderqueer, third gender and all manner of
people who identify outside of the gender binary system exist in the world alongside their transsexual counterparts who identify solidly as “men” or “women.” As I am sure Namaste and I would agree, all people under the trans/gender umbrella, however they identify, deserve access to health care, shelter, healthy food and dignified work.

Theorizing about the possibilities beyond the sexual binary does not “take away” from efforts to change institutions and social systems on the ground. I simply do not see the two things as being in competition with each other; in fact, I see them as complimentary. Namaste questions the “relevance of a transgendered theory or activism that cannot negotiate the actual world, or at least that cannot negotiate the world as experienced by people without housing, employment, or health care” (23). Many of those people without housing, employment or health care are genderqueer, third gender or people with identities beyond the sex-gender-sexuality binaries. Namaste’s writing seems to assume that only “traditional” transsexuals (which she privileges over other trans constituencies) are the people without their basic needs met while gender revolutionaries are a bunch of privileged and affluent people sitting in the academic tower “theorizing” (made all the more intriguing since Namaste is herself a tenured associate professor and academic researcher). While attention to material concerns must be paramount, that does not preclude attentiveness to issues of language, identity and discursivity. Although we must prioritize the needs of the most marginalized constituencies in the trans community, utilizing the organization FIERCE!’s notion of a “flood-up” approach, we must simultaneously continue to push the boundaries of language and discursive terrains, arguing for multiplicity and complexity to disrupt the tyranny of gender bipolarity.
While some may critique the importance of multiplicity as a theoretical concept, I see it is pivotal for creating a world where gender is fundamentally transformed. In addition, I see it as crucial when thinking about the future of trans media productions, distribution and spectatorship. The full breadth of gender nonconforming people is rarely given visibility in media culture. As these trans bodies are increasingly articulated within the proliferation of media texts, I am hopeful that it will engender new ways of seeing and speaking that raise consciousness and promote radical political struggle for liberation.

**Changing Media Technologies and Transgender Agency**

If we look at the films examined in Chapter Five, several common factors emerge. All of these films challenge the medicalization of trans identities and break with the traditional “procedural” vision of rote explanations of physical transition processes for transsexuals. These documentary films typically present the transsexual as an individual plagued by a baffling condition (“trapped in the wrong body”) who then must jump through psychiatric, legal and bureaucratic hoops to change from one sexed category to another. Once they have undergone sex reassignment surgery, their life is complete and they are now “whole” men and women. These films present transsexuality as an unfortunate condition that places a burden on people to move through the well-established protocols of gender transition and then began their “real” life after surgery magically transforms them into the “opposite sex.” Almost always, these post-operative transsexuals are white, middle-class and presented in apolitical ways. In addition to erasing the diversity of trans people (race, class, disability, age, etc.) they also negate the diversity of identifications within the trans community itself (genderqueer, third gender,
gender fluid et al.) They also fail to place the trans subject within a highly politicized social realm, refusing to show the extent of gender oppression that trans people face as well as the resistance and agency that gender-variant people call upon to ameliorate their own situation and that of their community.

The “new wave” of films that I analyzed in Chapter Five is bound to expand and gain increased circulation throughout the culture. It is particularly important for critical trans people, and our allies, to take media into our own hands. We must become media producers in our own right. Obviously this is a complicated question because of the issue of essentialism. It is important for me to state clearly that I do not believe that only trans people can, or should, make movies about trans people. However, I do believe that cisgender people have often done a spectacularly bad job at representing our lives, and that issues of cultural appropriation and power cannot be ignored.

Transgender agency will see more and more of us producing our own media and pushing our progressive political agendas through the medium of film. I believe this development is the result of at least two important cultural shifts. Firstly, the trans community itself has matured tremendously since the early to mid-1990s. We have formed a community, become more politicized than ever before, and begun the arduous process of decolonizing our minds away from the hegemony of psychiatric and medical control. In addition, there has been an associated artistic and cultural renaissance due to our increased political capital and cultural emergence. This has included poetry and spoken word, theater, performance art, studio art, photography, film production, radio programming and podcasting, pop music, folk music, hip hop, dance and many other artistic and cultural productions.9 As an oppressed, marginalized community, I believe
we have many stories to tell, and that art, especially filmmaking, provides an outlet for expression, protest and creativity. In addition to the cultural renaissance, there have been revolutionary changes in technology. Digital cameras are affordable for many people, and digital video editing is both more accessible (on personal computers) and easier to learn. With very little training or study, the average person can utilize iMovie or Windows Movie Maker to make a short film, create their own advertising, and then post their films on YouTube where the film will have the potential of being seen by thousands of people. The Internet in general and YouTube in particular have greatly changed the entire media landscape. The digital age has put video production technologies into the hands of more people, including people from stigmatized minority groups. In addition, more and more people are distributing their own films, making them instantly available through digital streaming or easy to order via the Internet. On the other hand, with tens of thousands of videos available on the web, the competition is fierce to get your work and its message seen and appreciated. The media proliferation, as with many humanistic concerns in this project, has both positive and negative features. The trans cultural artistic renaissance, coupled with advances in technology, make the appearance of more trans political films, as well as more light-hearted films that simply chronicle aspects of trans existence ignored by the mainstream, inevitable. But creating media is only half the battle. As Namaste documents in *Sex Change, Social Change*: “That there is general denial of transsexual access to the media is clear. What is perhaps less obvious, however, is that this dismissal occurs despite the tenacious efforts of transsexual activists to have their voices heard in these forums” (44). In addition to producing more politicized and liberatory media, trans people and our allies must bring these same activist efforts to bear
on getting trans voices heard in mainstream and alternative media venues. Namaste writes “…we need to understand such issues systematically, which is to say in relation to questions of power and control over access to representation…institutional exclusion from self-representation occurs in the most persistent and pernicious manner” (45). The agency and activist skill of media producers will be tested in the coming years as these producers fight to have their own voices made visible.

**Human Liberation and Degendering**

As I conclude this dissertation, I would like to put the project in a larger socio-cultural context. Certainly, I have analyzed a wide array of media texts and asked about how they produce cultural codes and master texts that then circulate throughout society as a whole. How do these texts re-present transgender people and how do they perpetuate cultural ideologies about gender and sexual variance? How do they reproduce social identities and subjectivities through the way they frame gender-variant people and the way they posit a “normative” audience? And how do viewers potentially make meaning from these texts, read against the grain and participate in a cultural nexus that involves a contestation over meaning? And finally, how are trans people trapped in a larger framework of signification that perpetuates the interests of the ruling class and that codifies, condones, normalizes and promotes the continued marginalization and oppression of disenfranchised groups in our society?

Given the enormous weight of the cultural machinery that is organized against us, it is difficult to be optimistic. But my interest in this topic certainly does not emanate only from thinking about media as a tool to mete out oppression and hatred. I see media as a tool of liberation and a powerful way to help foment revolution. While the
proliferation of trans media and challenges to the binary gender system are important, they are not, in and of themselves, enough. My own vision of gender, however utopic, is much deeper.

Ultimately for me, that revolution is to end gender as we know it. I agree with Judith Lorber, who calls for the “degendering” of society. Gender has outlived its usefulness as a cultural category. The harm and damage it has done to humanity under patriarchy is incalculable. It is time for gender to be phased out of human societal frameworks. Human liberation, across all socially produced differences, is dependent on radically new paradigms of social organization. Ultimately, I see the feminist, queer and transgender liberation struggles as interim phases rather than as ends unto themselves. The ultimate place of arrival for me is a world without gender, and to imagine a world without gender gives me tremendous hope for a more livable future. Lorber writes:

I think that for feminists in modern Western civilizations, going beyond gender is a needed step toward gender equality, with the immediate target for change the legal rigidity of gender statuses, their constant use in the allocation of family work and paid jobs, and the embedded notion of men’s entitlement to women’s services and sexuality… Many feminists have implicitly called for a gender-free society by urging the minimization of the effects of gender, to the point of gender’s practical disappearance. I am arguing here for a gender-free society to be an explicit and primary goal (155, 160).

The move to degender society moves beyond feminism, queer rights and even transgender liberation. As Lorber writes, degendering asks for more than gender equality
and the minimization of gender roles, even beyond smashing sexual roles as we know them. While bodies would continue to be multiply-sexed in terms of differing genitals and reproductive systems, these sexed inscriptions on the body, beyond procreative abilities, would be meaningless in the socio-cultural sphere. For me, imagining a world without gender, where people’s bodies do not impact upon the roles allotted to them in society and culture, is an invigorating and exhilarating ideal. Can media culture play an important role in helping to usher in this revolutionary new period in human freedom and liberation?

Media representations can help us not only to articulate radically different gendered possibilities, it can help us, in the words of Sandy Stone, to see differently and to speak differently. Lorber writes: “Without binary opposites, cultural representations of people will be much more varied and imaginative, as in some science fiction today. The process of degendering and resistance and rebellion will provide rich cultural material” (174). Media can both document the gender changes taking part in the culture at large, as well as encourage those changes. Perhaps the gender revolution will be televised. The “reel world” can continue to have a position of influence on society, but have “varied and imaginative” images that contribute in the short term to feminist, queer and trans liberation, and, in the long term, to the more radical social overhaul of degendering society.

I would not care about media culture as much as I do if I did not see room for substantive change in the media industry and its ability to promote positive growth and social change. While the radical vision I share with Lorber of degendering will take many generations to witness, I am confident that in the short term the resiliency and
chutzpah of society’s “gender warriors” will result in media productions and media
activisms that push the cultural envelope in electrifying ways. From the reel world to the
real world, from the ivory tower to the streets, the struggle for gender freedom will roar
with an unstoppable reverberation, and in the process the entire human family will be
fundamentally transformed.
CHAPTER SIX ENDNOTES

1 For an excellent primer on what is meant by reception studies, see: *Media Reception Studies* by Janet Staiger. The book surveys the past century of scholarship on reception studies and provides a map to the theory and research that has come to define the field. Staiger writes: “Reception studies asks, What kinds of meanings does a text have? For whom? In what circumstances? With what changes over time? And do these meanings have any effects? Cognitive? Emotional? Social? Political? (2) My own work does not examine trans images in such a systemic way, nor does it use qualitative or quantitative research to specifically gauge audience’s reaction to depictions of gender variance.

2 I want to again stress the “Gender Identity Disorder” (GID) diagnosis currently in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of Mental Disorders. This diagnosis has been used over and over by far right-wing ideologues to present transgender people as severely dangerous and disturbed and therefore unworthy of civil rights and dignity. Kelley Winters catalogues the ways in which many individuals and groups have used this specious diagnosis to try to deny trans people our rights and delegitimize us as a community. See her chapter: "Psychosexual Stigma" from *Gender Madness in American Psychiatry: Essays from the Struggle for Dignity*, p. 71-78. These are among the already circulating discourses that images of psychotic trans killers can be added to, resulting in a combined troubling portrait.

3 Genderism is, of course, related to patriarchy and male dominance, but it is not synonymous with it. In fact, gender-conforming cissexual women also benefit from genderism and often perpetuate bigotry against trans women and utilize their privilege to oppress trans people. In addition, gender-normative gay men and lesbians often exhibit genderism and use genderqueer/trans people to prop up their own supposed “normality” and jettison the gender “riff-raff” to propel their own civil rights projects.

4 For a discussion of these three “hypothetical positions” from which readers read texts, see: *Decoding Culture: Theory and Method in Cultural Studies* by Andrew Tudor, p. 126-132.

5 For instance, in the introduction to his book *Outtakes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, Ellis Hanson criticizes many early critics of gay and lesbian film, like Vito Russo, for their engagement in a “politics of representation” model, a model that this project proudly takes part in. Hanson writes of Russo’s *The Celluloid Closet*: “We find in this book no concern for aesthetics of cinematic form, no discussion of the complexities of desire and identification, no appreciation of political nuance, no understanding of homoeroticism beyond the representation of gay characters, and no attention to Hollywood styles or genres that are popular with queer audiences even when there are no ostensibly gay characters” (7). His edited volume hopes to embody a “more nuanced analysis of queer desire and spectatorship” to “offset some of the critical dead-ends of the ‘positive images’ tradition in both feminist and gay criticism” (12). And yet, I would argue, these more nuanced analyses would not be possible without a preliminary politicized reading that place the texts squarely under the microscope of queer, trans liberationists and feminist interpretative frameworks.

6 While I am not asserting that queer theory is to blame for the emergence of these assimilationist political groups or the wider phenomenon of homonormativity, I would argue that the debates fostered in queer theory have not exactly helped the situation. With their emphasis on deconstructing identity and privileging the individual, it is difficult for those interested in queer/trans activism to extract useful strategies for political mobilization from the queer theory canon.

7 The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) frequently touts itself as the largest group advocating for GLBT rights in the U.S. HRC is nearly universally reviled in the trans community for the way it has ignored or minimized transgender rights. HRC pledged its support for the legislation called the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) only if it included both sexual orientation and gender identity. However, when transphobic gay congressman Barney Frank dropped the gender identity language from the bill, HRC continued to support it despite the outcry of anger from the trans and allied community. In addition to transphobia, HRC is frequently criticized for their whiteness, their middle to upper class bias, and their strong ties to corporate America.


9 Poets/Spoken word artists include Harvey Katz (AKA Athen’s Boys Choir), Anaturale, Eli Clare, and Ely Shipley. Musical artists include Katastrophe, Joshua Klipp, Namoli Brennet, Georgie Jessup, All the Pretty
Horses, Dana International, and Jayne County. Theater and performance artists include Kate Bornstein and Scott Turner-Schofield and trans photographers like Loren Cameron, Del LaGrace Volcano and Jess Dugan. Radio/TV hosts of trans programming include Ethan St. Pierre and Nancy Nangeroni. Filmmakers include Jules Rosskam, Andrea James, Calpernia Adams, Gwen Haworth and Ashley Altadonna, among many others.

10 Judith Lorber writes extensively about deliberate degendering in her book *Breaking the Bowls: Degendering and Feminist Change*. She asserts in the book that “it is time to rebel against gender as a social institution—to challenge its categorizations and ascriptive practices. I’m calling for a rebellion against the division of everyone into ‘women’ and ‘men’ and all that is built on that division—gendered work organizations, families, political power, and culture” (4).
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