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**Transgender Gaze, Neoliberal Haze:
the impact of neoliberalism on trans female bodies in the Anglophone Global North**

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Ethical statement

This thesis includes the analyses of texts by, or about, trans women of colour. As a white scholar, I am conscious of my privileged position within an academic setting in having this opportunity. I write with a platform that several of these women, and many others who might have had such a platform themselves in a fairer society, lack access to. Aware of this position of power and privilege that I occupy, I state here, at the outset, that I do not claim to speak for or on behalf of the trans women of colour in this thesis. Instead, my research displays and analyses their words, in relation to some of the forms of oppression these women face as a result of a socio-economic and political system with white supremacy at its heart.

Abstract

This thesis analyses the impact of neoliberalism on trans female bodies, in recognition of a warning by trans studies scholar Dean Spade that identifies how “activists and theorists have tended to miss the vital connection between economic and anticapitalist analysis and the regulation of sexual and gender expression and behavior” (2006: 218). With a focus on the arts, this thesis addresses the gap in scholarship by analysing several literary and cinematic texts featuring trans or gender nonconforming bodies. The thesis argues that patterns emerge between visibility and ideological compatibility: this includes either in relation to neoliberal ideals, characterized by what Sujatha Fernandes calls “entrepreneurial, upwardly mobile subjects” (Fernandes, 2017: 3), or according to majoritarian norms implicitly present in neoliberal society, including middle-class notions of female identity. The thesis concludes that the rhetoric of individual liberty and meritocracy that characterizes neoliberal capitalism is a selective and ultimately illusory one, and implicitly divides trans female bodies into either a form of homonormative legitimacy, or a more marginalized, ideologically incompatible Other. The newly liberated Transgender Gaze and Voice, emerging in film and literature as part of what Aren Aizura calls “the enormous groundswell of transgender cultural production in the 2010s” (2018: 89), is therefore to be celebrated but also viewed with caution given the varying, ideologically sanctioned visibility and invisibility of particular texts.

Lay Summary

In this PhD thesis I address the exciting surge of “transgender cultural production in the 2010s” (Aizura, 2018: 89), with a focus on the representation of trans female bodies in film and literature. In doing so, I study the socio-economic impact of neoliberal capitalism on these representations, and why certain representations gain visibility, and others less so. I argue that representations that align with neoliberal themes of upward mobility, career success, private property, and self-reliance, enjoy particular visibility. Equally, we see the importance for the trans female body of resembling as closely as possible the notions of cisgender female beauty. Texts, meanwhile, which subvert or contradict gendered norms or neoliberal ideals, and which expose issues of inequality and forms of oppression as part of neoliberal society, enjoy far less visibility.

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Yn gyntaf, i'm rhieni. Diolch am eich cariad a chefnogaeth trwy gydol fy mywyd.

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Contents

Introduction

i. Neoliberalism in relation to trans female bodies in film and literature	8
ii. Gaze and Voice: analysing trans female bodies in film and literature	14
iii. Global argument, local arguments, thesis structure, and the texts selected	17
iv. Theoretical background: postmodern and neoliberal-related critiques	22
v. Taxonomy of the transgender woman	32
vi. Cisheteropatriarchy, Intersectional Feminism, and Lacanian terminology	39

Chapter 1

When the Cisgender Gaze Fails to See a Transgender Body: <i>Kiss of the Spider Woman</i>	43
---	----

Chapter 2

When the Cisgender Gaze Defines a Trans Female Body for a Cisgender Society: David Ebershoff's novel <i>The Danish Girl</i>	84
--	----

Chapter 3

Fictional Movies: Where Transgender and Cisgender Gazes Collide

- i. Introduction: The Male / Cisgender Gaze in *The Danish Girl* and *Girl*107
- ii. The Transgender Gaze in *A Fantastic Woman*115

Chapter 4

The Transgender Voice in Memoir

- i. Introduction136
- ii. Janet Mock in *Redefining Realness*.....145
- iii. Lovemme Corazon in *Trauma Queen*175

Chapter 5

The Transgender Voice in Polemical Essay-Writing and Fiction

- i. Introduction210
- ii. Essays by Jamie Berrout216
- iii. The short story ‘Mansion’ by Jamie Berrout230
- iv. The short story ‘Subject’ by Jamie Berrout244

Chapter 6

Documentary: the Transgender Gaze and the Value of Community

- i. Introduction.....271
- ii. *Miss Maria, Skirting the Mountain*275
- iii. *Free CeCe!*297

Conclusions to Transgender Gaze, Neoliberal Haze

.....332

Works Cited and Appendices

.....343

Introduction

i. Neoliberalism in relation to trans female bodies in film and literature

This study is intended to address an underdeveloped area of research in Trans as well as Queer Studies, namely the impact of neoliberal ideology on the representation of trans female bodies in the Anglophone Global North, in this case, in the depiction of trans women in literature and film. As Dean Spade says of its relative absence within Queer Studies, “many lesbian, gay, and bi activists and theorists have tended to miss the vital connection between economic and anticapitalist analysis and the regulation of sexual and gender expression and behavior” (2006: 218). Similarly, on the theme of regulation, and implicitly, representation, Dan Irving identifies the need within Trans Studies to analyse the “underexamined” patterns “in which hegemonic capitalism’s socioeconomic and political relations are reproduced vis-à-vis the transsexual body” (2013: 16). Irving also highlights another neglected area, namely the material consequences of neoliberalism on trans lives, in which “critical analyses of the impact of capitalist productive relations on trans subjectivities are rarely offered.” As this research makes clear, these two areas of regulation and economic impact are connected: within neoliberalism, regulated representations of a ‘right’ kind of transgender woman become welcomed in mainstream discourse, aligned to what Sujatha Fernandes describes as some of the characteristics of neoliberal narratives, namely, “entrepreneurial, upwardly mobile subjects” (2017: 3). Concurrently, representations that reveal these qualities as being inaccessible, and which

effectively show trans subjectivities at odds with a neoliberal worldview within the Anglophone Global North, are marginalized. Deconstructing the qualities and elements of each text selected for this research, in relation to this divergence, is the primary goal of each chapter.

In terms of the context, Irving's multi-faceted framing of neoliberalism is also important when he describes "hegemonic capitalism's socioeconomic and political relations." This research shares Irving's position, and that of several theorists and commentators, in acknowledging the pervasive ideological power of neoliberalism as being beyond mere economics, in the shaping of a mainstream ideology and worldview in the Anglophone Global North. William Davies for example argues, "neoliberalism is not simply reducible to 'market fundamentalism,'" but more broadly that "the neoliberal state takes the principle of competition and the ethos of competitiveness (which historically have been found in and around markets), and seeks to reorganise society around them" (2017: xvi). The implications of this re-organization are complex and extensive. Various socio-political commentators such as Naomi Klein and George Monbiot observe that the Anglophone Global North has transformed towards producing neoliberal societies since the 1980s. This includes via national movements like the Thatcher governments in the U.K. and the Reagan administrations in the U.S.A., aided by the emergence of financially powerful and ideologically aligned, trans-national institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (Klein, 2007; Monbiot, 2018). In step with these developments are other less formally political institutions of arguably no less power, including the 'Fourth Estate' of the media. Douglas Kellner analyses the parallel emergence of the right-wing media empire of Rupert Murdoch since the late 1970s in the U.K., with its market-

leading tabloid and broadsheet newspapers, and then from the 1990s in the U.S.A., with Fox News. Kellner argues that “not only was Murdoch the major purveyor of an aggressively right-wing political slant on the news, but he also degraded journalism and helped create the tabloidization of both news and information” (2012: 1172). The intensified commercialization of the media, as both symbolized and influenced by the rise of Murdoch’s media empire in the Anglophone Global North, during this same era as Thatcher, Reagan, and their political successors, can be said to have consolidated and disseminated this ideological hegemony of neoliberalism in relation to informational gatekeeping. By its absence, meanwhile, the collapse of the U.S.S.R. has contributed to the sense that there are no longer any alternatives to the U.S. model. This notion of there being no other way has been respectively lamented and celebrated, in the former case by Mark Fisher in his work *Capitalist Realism* (2009), and in the latter by Francis Fukuyama’s equally zeitgeistian, post-Cold-War thesis, *The end of history and the last man* (1992).

A brief selection of overlapping analyses is useful at this point in order to understand the scale of impact of neoliberalism on the economic, political, and social realms in the Anglophone Global North, and why they are pertinent to the analyses of trans female bodies. Irving’s analysis provides one useful summary, in noting the shift in employment patterns towards, “for the most part precarious, part-time, low-wage positions with few or no benefits,” and which result in “ever-expanding pools of un(der)employed workers whose vulnerability creates conditions of desperation” (25). With this increasing precarity, a moral value system has emerged that effectively

legitimizes or dehumanizes the citizen, in alignment with their material conditions.

Monbiot for example observes how,

“In a world governed by competition, those who fall behind come to be defined and self-defined as losers. The rich are the new righteous, while the poor are the new deviants, who have failed both economically and morally, and are now classified as social parasites” (2018: 35).

Depending on where they stand either side of this division, trans people similarly can become either valued members of society, or derided and distrusted. Irving for example notes how “Transsexual individuals can be viewed as viable neoliberal subjects: [if] they have proven to be flexible and fluid, self-sufficient, and major contributors to their families, workplaces, communities, and societies” (26). This opportunity for validation for trans people able to succeed in the competitive neoliberal society is noted by Irving, who says, “To many, emphasizing the normative potential of transsexuality has been a successful strategy to counter the marginalizing effects of pathologization.” Such a development replicates a pattern within LGB movements since the 1990s, as conceptualized by Lisa Duggan in the form of homonormativity. According to Duggan, this involves a mode of respectability politics practised by mainstream gay rights movements that “does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (2002: 179).

The consequence of a division between a ‘Good’ or ‘right kind of’ trans woman and a less legitimate type is not new, though it is worth recognizing how the qualities that

make a socially acceptable transgender woman have changed since before neoliberalism's ascent. Focusing on representations of trans women in the media in the 1950s and 1960s, Emily Skidmore identifies a pattern of suitable and unsuitable trans women in the media furor surrounding Christine Jorgenson, and the occlusion of many of her peers from public discourse. This divide is typified not only by Jorgenson's alignment with a Eurocentric idealization of beauty by being petite, blonde, and cis-passing, but also extolling verbally and in her behaviour the qualities of "domesticity, respectability, and heterosexuality" (2011: 271). Skidmore's analysis notes other, significant advantages for Jorgenson in relation to race/ethnicity and class, with Jorgenson reflecting the perception that "white women were cast as chaste, moral, and refined" (293), particularly when encompassing "middle-class respectability" (275). In this analysis by Skidmore, we see the overlapping of race/ethnicity and class in idealizing female identity, be it cis or trans. By contrast, trans women of colour of the same era, such as Carlett Brown and Ava Betty Brown (Snorton, 2017: 157), struggle against police harassment and accompanying financial penalties that make transitioning or for that matter any material prosperity virtually impossible.

It is here that we see how the neoliberal rhetoric of meritocracy and, by association, diversity and/or colorblindness, transforms notions of a 'Good' trans woman in the twenty-first century, with neoliberal ideology now entrenched in the Anglophone Global North. Aren Aizura for example highlights how, "Aside from the Caitlyn Jenner cottage industry, it is clear that lately the white, middle-class transsexual memoir has largely been abandoned in the public imaginary" (2018: 89). Aizura in turn notes the emergence of trans women of colour like Janet Mock and Laverne Cox as celebrities,

with their memoirs, regular talkshow participation, and/or TV shows. Aizura says, “the recent focus on trans women of color in trans cultural representations evidences a historical shift toward neoliberal multiculturalism in which trans people of color are championed as representatives of institutional diversity.” It is a development which, as Aizura indicates, requires the additional demands of the rare but high-profile trans woman of colour “to perform more labor as such,” in educating the majoritarian cis, white-centred culture of the existence of trans people. In turn, however, this visibility is conditional, with Mock and Cox for example restricted to a relative ideological conformity in their public output.

It is via reference to Mock and Cox, and the combination of identitarian difference and relative ideological conformity, predicated on an implicit meritocracy, that the neoliberal relationship with trans women is partially encapsulated, by demonstrating how ideological hegemony either allows or restricts particular types of transness into the public sphere. As noted by Fernandes, the economic, political, and social effects of neoliberalism are underpinned via ideologically affirming storytelling and representation. Fernandes elaborates, “Alongside a broader shift to neoliberal and financialized economies, storytelling is being reconfigured on the model of the market to produce entrepreneurial, upwardly mobile subjects and is leveraged toward strategic and measurable goals driven by philanthropic foundations” (2-3). Mock in fact recognises how her success is appropriated within mainstream media to bolster U.S. narratives of how opportunity and meritocracy are the norm for every citizen: “I have been held up consistently as a token, as the ‘right’ kind of trans woman (educated, able-bodied, attractive, articulate, heteronormative). It promotes the delusion that because I ‘made it,’

that level of success is easily accessible to all young trans women. Let's be clear: It is not" (2014: xvii). Mock's largely depoliticized output, via her two memoirs and her interviews on the U.S. talkshow circuit, nevertheless can be said to contribute to this 'delusion' in the romantic mainstream celebration of her rags-to-riches success. For all her talent as a public speaker and writer, as well as her striking cis-passing beauty, Mock's success is predicated not only on what she addresses (romance, career, transitioning, hardships during childhood), but what she avoids discussing. This includes in relation to a consistent, structural critique of neoliberal ideology and the way it debilitates the very communities for which she claims to advocate. Concurrently, as Fernandes notes, "Those who are able to make their personal experiences legible to the mainstream through drawing on dominant narratives and devices are given a platform while other voices are silenced" (5). In short, a neoliberal haze obscures certain kinds of representations, while making way for those that affirm the values of neoliberal society.

ii. Gaze and Voice: analyzing trans female bodies in film and literature

As noted by Aizura, the Anglophone Global North has witnessed a shift during the ascendancy of neoliberalism in representations of trans women in the public sphere. This includes a greater emphasis on racial/ethnic diversity and the impression of financial/professional self-reliance, and away from idealizations of hyper-femininity and domesticity that characterized Christine Jorgenson's 'Good transsexual' in the mid-twentieth century. Within the visual medium of film, including documentary, the changes under neoliberalism have been variable in terms of the extent of a sympathetic or nuanced

portrayal. Drawing on the influential Gaze theory of Laura Mulvey, with its analysis of the Male Gaze and the objectification of the female subject/object in cinema, Jack Halberstam introduces the notion of a multi-faceted transgender-based equivalent. Halberstam for example suggests via cinematic examples some of the different possibilities in which the generation of “revulsion, sympathy, or empathy” provide “mainstream viewers access to a transgender gaze” (2013: 120). As implied by these reactions, catering for the Cisgender Gaze appears to remain vital at least in commercial cinema. As such, it is unsurprising that Halberstam’s example of a genuinely liberating, counter-cultural trans film, the “no-budget” *By Hook or By Crook* (2001), comes with little apparent attempt from its makers to be the kind of mainstream, awards-bait success typified by a Hollywood depiction like director Tom Hooper’s lavish, period drama *The Danish Girl* (2015). The notion of a Transgender Gaze in both mainstream and more independent filmmaking nevertheless remains an important and necessary element to be analysed, not least given the historically problematic depiction of trans women on screen in the twentieth century. Halberstam asks, “What would a transgender film look like that did not punish the transgender subject for his or her inflexibilities and for failing to deliver the fantasy of fluidity that cinematic audiences so desire?” (127). In this research, a series of films, both fictional and documentary, are analysed in relation to a Transgender Gaze for two main reasons. Firstly, the aim is to analyse the trans woman in resistance to the historic prevalence of the Male Gaze and the Cisgender Gaze in cinema. The texts are, however, also deconstructed for a second purpose, namely their ideological complicity to the neoliberal status quo. In this sense, the thesis demonstrates how different Transgender Gazes have emerged, in some texts on condition of its alignment

with an implicitly neoliberal worldview, but with other texts while avoiding or even rejecting key characteristics of neoliberal ideology. In the latter case, this thesis highlights the lack of mainstream visibility of these subversive texts as a potential price for ideological non-conformity.

In extension of the emergence of a Transgender Gaze on screen, this thesis also analyses literary texts in relation to the notion of a Transgender Voice. Similar to Halberstam's study of the Transgender Gaze, Andrew Anastasia describes the Transgender Voice as potentially multi-faceted and, "used metaphorically, signifies multiple meanings at once: a sound that represents a person, the agency by which an opinion is expressed, and the expressed will of a people" (2014: 262). Citing analysis by Susan Stryker, Anastasia notes how historically, the Transgender Voice "has concerned itself with being 'a necessary strategy to combat logics of pathologization.'" With the potential shift of trans female identity in a twenty-first-century neoliberal society, from pathologized subject to socio-economically thriving/failing citizen, this research analyses the interaction of trans subjectivity against the context of neoliberalism. In doing so, the work of Fernandes on ideologically complicit, curated storytelling remains relevant, in noting how "Those who are able to make their personal experiences legible to the mainstream through drawing on dominant narratives and devices are given a platform while other voices are silenced." This research focuses on literary texts, as with filmic ones, as examples on either side of the divide between ideological conformity that have enjoyed relative mainstream visibility, and those published on the margins and which in some way challenge or undermine the mainstream audience's view of the legitimacy of neoliberal society in the Anglophone Global North.

iii. Global argument, local arguments, thesis structure, and the texts involved

As a global argument, this thesis argues that neoliberalism impacts on trans female bodies, with a relationship between ideological compatibility and visibility.

We see this relationship realized in trans-related, and trans-produced film and literature, including during the “enormous groundswell of transgender cultural production in the 2010s” identified by Aizura (2018: 89). This division, between more visible and less visible trans female bodies, is partly indicative of neoliberal’s celebration or dehumanization of citizens as winners and losers, according to their material circumstances, described by Monbiot as “a world governed by competition, [where] those who fall behind come to be defined and self-defined as losers. The rich are the new righteous, while the poor are the new deviants, who have failed both economically and morally” (2018: 35). This thesis acknowledges the emergence during this period of Transgender Gazes in film and Transgender Voices in literature, but also warns of the ideological conditions that come with the increased visibility of these Gazes and Voices.

Each chapter addresses a particular result of this impact. Broadly, the chapters are divided by a two-part chronological structure. Chapters 1 and 2 provide the context of ‘early’ neoliberal-era texts from the 1980s and 1990s (in the latter case published in 2000), with an entrenched Male/Cisgender Gaze, as well as their enduring legacy. The thesis then switches to texts produced in the 2010s, during the period of “the enormous groundswell of transgender cultural production” acknowledged by Aizura. Chapter 3 analyses fiction-based cinema; Chapter 4 analyses trans memoir; Chapter 5 analyses

trans-produced essay-writing and fiction; Chapter 6 analyses trans-centred documentary.

The local arguments of each chapter are as follows:

- a. Chapter 1: The Anglophone Global North viewed gender nonconformity through a Cisgender Gaze in the 1980s, in alignment with the socially conservative climate of the time

Chapter 1 analyses the Argentine novel and subsequent Brazilian-Hollywood film adaptation of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1976, 1985). The gender nonconforming character in the story is portrayed through a pathologizing Freudian lens, and is ultimately reduced to a cipher for a cisgender castration fantasy. It reflects in turn the relative invisibility of transness within this early period of the neoliberal Anglophone Global North, and the conservative ‘culture war’ on ‘deviant’ LGBT+-related identities.

- b. Chapter 2: Neoliberalism rewards representations aligned to the Cisgender Gaze, with the trans woman reduced to a cisgender castration fantasy.

Chapter 2 analyses cis writer David Ebershoff’s novel *The Danish Girl* (2000). Ideologically, the text conforms to a representation shaped by both a Male Gaze and a Cisgender one, and underlines the continuing dominance of these Gazes in mainstream representations of trans women at the turn of the twenty-first century. The chapter also addresses the power and patronage enjoyed by the author in reward for what is effectively

a cisgender castration fantasy posing as a classical realist representation of real trans lives.

- c. Chapter 3: Neoliberalism favours homonormative representations, with the trans woman affirming a neoliberal landscape that ultimately enables her to enjoy self-actualization.

Chapter 3 analyses the Academy-Award-winning Chilean film *A Fantastic Woman* (2017), arguing that it simultaneously produces a nuanced and legitimizing urban portrayal of trans female identity, while also being ideologically aligned to neoliberal ideals of meritocracy and private citizenship. Chapter 3 contrasts this text in the introduction with two other films of the same era, *The Danish Girl* (2015) and *Girl* (2019). The chapter highlights how *A Fantastic Woman* constructs an affirming and narratively distinct Transgender Gaze, while *The Danish Girl* and *Girl* structure their representations through a familiar Male and Cisgender Gaze, relying on tropes related to a transition narrative, bodily crisis, and as with Ebershoff's novel in Chapter 2, the arc of a cisgender castration fantasy. A tension therefore exists between a newly emerging Transgender Gaze, and an enduring Cisgender one.

- d. Chapter 4: Neoliberalism celebrates ethnic diversity, providing the representation is ideologically compatible with ideals of meritocracy.

Chapter 4 analyses memoirs by black and brown trans women in the U.S.A. The chapter argues that the first of these, Janet Mock's bestselling memoir *Redefining Realness* (2014), primarily about her childhood and adolescence, exemplifies a neoliberal, homonormative trans female text, consistent with Mock's broader celebrity brand. The chapter then argues that a second text, Lovemme Corazon's memoir and implicitly 'teenage diary,' *Trauma Queen* (2013), represents a radical departure from the mainstream-friendly, and contemporary homonormative canon of trans memoir and autobiography. This is accomplished through *Trauma Queen*'s focus on debilitating mental health and the lack of adequate support services, the adolescent subject's sexuality, and their explicit identification of the U.S.A. as an oppressive, white-supremacist State. *Trauma Queen*'s status, firstly having been published by the small, QTPOC-(queer and trans people of colour)-focused Biyuti Press, then by going out of print, contrasts given its thematic difference with more commercially successful texts, in the case of this chapter, Mock's series of homonormative, 'New York Bestseller' memoirs published by mainstream publisher Simon and Schuster.

- e. Chapter 5: Neoliberal-aligned homonormative LGBT+ organizations implicitly occlude or explicitly exclude activism based on structural critiques that challenge the current, neoliberal, socio-economic and political paradigm.

Chapter 5 focuses on works by Mexican trans woman and writer Jamie Berrout. The chapter argues that these radically critical, self-published texts expose the fractures

in trans and broader LGBT+ activism, between mainstream, homonormative-aligned, single-issue activism that focuses on areas that are likely to directly affect white, middle-class trans women, while occluding intersectional issues relating to policing and socio-economic disempowerment of QTPOC communities. By way of contrast, the chapter analyses elements of the homonormative memoir by former Human Rights Campaign spokesperson and now Democratic Senator Sarah McBride, *Tomorrow Will Be Better* (2018).

- f. Neoliberalism occludes or makes remote the representations of trans female bodies incompatible with the depoliticized, individualistic narrative of transitioning trans women and/or “entrepreneurial, upwardly mobile subjects” (Fernandes, 2017: 3)

The chapter analyses two documentaries that were, at the time of writing, prohibitively difficult to acquire. Thanks to the financial support of the University of Edinburgh, *Free CeCe!* was, as in the case of the out-of-print memoir *Trauma Queen*, acquired at significant cost to the university and made available for study. *Miss Maria, Skirting the Mountain*, unfortunately due to the distributor’s prohibitive pricing, remained unavailable (*see Appendix 1*). The challenges of acquiring these texts are significant given their respectively unconventional or subversive themes in relation to neoliberalism, in contrast to the easily available, more neoliberal-aligned texts such as Mock’s *Redefining Realness* or the film *A Fantastic Woman*, available from any mainstream distributor at the time of writing from £5-£10.

The chapter argues that the first of these texts, the semi-biographical documentary *Free CeCe!* (2016) about the incarceration of CeCe McDonald in 2012, is an anti-homonormative text that brings together explicit structural critiques of the prison industrial complex with a communitarian-focused ethos of activism.

The second documentary, *Miss Maria, Skirting the Mountain* (2017), while being similarly distant from homonormative conceptions of trans identity, highlights the gap between urban trans lives and those in remoter areas. In terms of sources, and given the unavailability of the original text, my analysis draws on my original blog post that reviewed the film, as well as the film's promotional trailer, some related online articles and subsequent, related TV shows in Colombia on the subject's life after the documentary.

Theoretical background: postmodern and neoliberal-related critiques

i. A Postmodern, Capitalist Context: Trans Identity as a Symptom of the Third Age of the Anglophone Global North

While Dean Spade and Dan Irving correctly highlight the lack of research within Trans and Queer Studies on the relationship between trans subjectivities and neoliberalism, several cultural theorists working within the fields of postmodernism and post-structuralism have produced works that analyse this connection, some optimistically, others pessimistically. This thesis will summarize some of these positions, to be referred to elsewhere in this thesis when utilized for context.

A recurring feature of a number of different studies about the current, neoliberal era concerns a broader ‘third’ age and its production of trans subjectivities. Michel Foucault’s implicit conception of three paradigms of sexualities, for example, marked sequentially by the Eurocentric discourses of religious judgment, psychiatric pathology, and capitalist individualism, has relevance for discussions on the erasure and later mediated tolerance of gender nonconforming identities (1998) [1976]. It is in this latter phase that Paul Preciado, with a transgender-focused analysis, identifies “the transition toward a third form of capitalism, after the slave-dependent and industrial systems” (2013: 25), characterized by the slogan “Consume or Die” (341). On the shaping of a transgender discourse within this third iteration, Preciado perceives the trend of a medical and pharmaceutical industrial fusion. This creates an industrial complex which produces social identities, “transforming our depression into Prozac, our masculinity into testosterone, our erection into Viagra ... without knowing which comes first: our depression or Prozac, Viagra or an erection, testosterone of masculinity” (34). The result for Preciado is “the invention of a *subject* and then its global reproduction” (36). Preciado’s aspiration, partly in reference to the shift from second wave to third wave feminism (107), is a de-essentializing of gender identity and an anti-capitalist rejection of the medical discourse that diagnoses gender dysphoria. Preciado refuses the ostensibly pathologizing term *transsexual*. He identifies instead via the support of computer-age discourse, “a dyke-transgender condition made up of numerous biocodes” with hormones as “chemical prostheses” (93, 396).

Preciado’s work is influential in Trans Studies and beyond its academic-weighted focus. The U.K. trans artist Emma Frankland for example at times integrates Preciado’s

language of biocodes and computer-age language to similarly liberate transgender discourse, as is evident in Frankland's show *Hearty* (Frankland, 2019). In a similar vein, and writing before the development of a politicized transgender movement in the 1990s, Donna Haraway conceives of liberating possibilities in terms of gender identity and feminism in her *Cyborg Manifesto* (2016) [1985]. While her perspective is both consciously ironic and utopian (5, 9), Haraway views developments within the third of "three major stages of capitalism (commercial/early industrial, monopoly, multinational)," and the third of "three dominant aesthetic periods of realism, modernism, and postmodernism" (40). Within this third, postmodern age, with new modes of oppression described by Haraway as "the informatics of domination" (28), opportunities occur involving "a new worldwide working class, as well as new sexualities and ethnicities" (37). Haraway's call is for an embrace of such developments, through adopting the image of the science-fictional cyborg, a symbol of "our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism" (7). In an implicit parallel to the post-colonial focus of B Camminga on trans identities integrating multiple local and transnational labels (*see the Taxonomy section in this chapter*), the emphasis by Haraway is on de-essentializing sex/gender identities through the understanding of "permanently partial identities" (15).

The optimism discernible in the work of Preciado and Haraway towards a diverse gender nonconformity represents only one set of perspectives, however, in relation to gender and especially transgender identity in the twenty-first century. More pessimistically, a patriarchal-based, hi-tech dystopia characterizes much of the cultural theory in relation to this triadic-inflected paradigm. Fredric Jameson for example defines

the contemporary backdrop as the “third stage of capitalism,” of “cybernetics and computers” (2007: 21). In characterizing our world as postmodern and the “end of master narratives,” (1991, x), Jameson’s analysis echoes Mark Fisher’s pessimistic assessment of “late capitalism” (2009: 1), and a “sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility” (7). This panorama of decay is apparent too in the perspective of Jean Baudrillard. He declares, “We are in the third order” (1998: 121), an era of simulation and hyperreality (135, 146), where through the power of the image, and copies of copies, “nothing is either true or false,” where “the excess of reality ... puts an end to reality, just as the excess of information puts an end to information” (2000: 62, 66). For Baudrillard, a shift has occurred, from the real to the artificial, including from the “sexual” to the “transsexual.” In a dehumanizing echo of Preciado, this is a paradigm of “prosthetics,” geared “towards artifice – both the anatomical artifice of changing sex and the play on vestimentary, morphological and gestural signs characteristic of cross-dressers” (2002: 9). True to his conception of hyperreality and in a reflection of Fisher’s view of political sterility, Baudrillard sees “how we subtly became transsexuals, just as we secretly became transpolitical – that is to say, politically indifferent and undifferentiated beings, politically androgynous and hermaphroditic” (13). The transsexual here embodies this allegedly apolitical age as a figure signifying both clone and deterioration, as a copy standing in for something real that has been lost, or rendered distant from any purported, meaningful origin.

In these analyses, the figure of the transsexual connotes neither Preciado’s bionic upgrade nor Haraway’s cyborg, but a dehumanizing technological wasteland. The symbolism overlaps with other end-of-days imagery connecting the undermining of

patriarchy with a decline of civilization. In what appears to be a synonymous use of male-castration symbolism, Baudrillard, like Fisher (2009: 6), refers to the Nietzschean figure of the Last Man of civilization:

“The individual we have produced, the absolutely self-regarding individual we glorify, the individual we protect in his impotence with the whole legal panoply of human rights is the ‘last man’ Nietzsche speaks of. He is the end-user of his own self and his own life, the terminal individual, with no real hope either of descendants or transcendence. This individual is the end of the cycle and of the species” (2002: 67).

It is here especially that Baudrillard’s work overlaps with the positions of other theorists who appear to harbour patriarchal anxieties about trans identity. Slavoj Žižek, blending his interpretations of Marxism with Lacanian psychoanalysis, similarly appears to mourn the undermining of patriarchal society, “in our era of ‘the decline of Oedipus’” (1999: 292). Žižek not only defines the current age as an apolitical era of “the Last Man, an apathetic creature with no great passion or commitment” (2008: 24), but analyses transgender identity according to this context. Referring to “Transgender dogma” and “LGBT+ ideologists,” Žižek identifies transgender subjectivity as a form of delusion, based on “the naïve view that, if sexuality is not distorted by patriarchal or binary pressure, it becomes a happy space of authentic expression of our true selves” (2019). Becoming transgender, Žižek implies, is aspirational, of buying into the good life, though one impossible to fulfill.

Yet such a conclusion does not necessarily belong only to advocates of patriarchy like Žižek. From a feminist perspective that refutes Baudrillard’s belief in a meaningful

shift from sex-based identities to trans-sexed ones, Rosi Braidotti identifies the impact of capitalism in establishing the illusion of transgendered and non-binary possibilities.

“Advanced capitalism,” says Braidotti, “is a spinning machine that actively produces differences for the sake of commodification” (2013: 58), including a “post-gender system capable of accommodating a high degree of androgyny and a significant blurring of the categorical divide between the sexes” (98). A recurring theme of Braidotti’s work is the establishment of a connection between gender nonconformity and “advanced capitalism.” Similar to Žižek, Braidotti warns that “the emphasis on degrees of indeterminacy, or in-betweenness, is a form of identity politics that is endemic to advanced capitalism, with its emphasis on individualism narrowly defined as the right to choose” (2011: 291).

Although Braidotti rejects the idea of gender and sex becoming replaced or fragmented by alternative formations, she shares the conclusions of Baudrillard and Žižek regarding the commodified appearance of such a development, and the production of a “transsexual paradigm” that for its willing consumers, “is an absolute lure, an illusion, a delusion rather” (2008). Contrary to Žižek’s mourning for a patriarchal order, Braidotti warns of the threat to feminism and the conditions of apparently cisgender women via the potential blurring of a fixed gender binary. “The fantasy,” Braidotti says,

“the promise, the socially-induced yearning for sexual indeterminacy and a proliferation of gender-positions ... are not, in my opinion, an actual progress in either the representation of the feminine or the real-life conditions of those who are the empirical referents for the feminine, namely women” (2002: 261).

What connects many of these perspectives, beyond their warning of the broader social and political destabilization created by “identity politics” (Braidotti, 2011: 291;

Žižek, 1999: 454) and “cultural studies” (Žižek, 1999: 261; Braidotti, 2002: 260), is the lack of interest in the legitimacy or experience of the transgender figure. As Eva Hayward says of Braidotti and Baudrillard, “Their work seems to imply that the transsexual is good to think with without transsexuals as lived subjectivities” (247). Hayward concludes, “The ethical problems of this interpretive move are difficult to ignore.” A characteristic of the perspectives of Baudrillard, Braidotti and Žižek, for example, is the absence of any reference to trans testimonies, with medical and/or capitalist discourses perceived as its only possible producer. Hayward criticizes Baudrillard and Braidotti specifically for presenting,

“trans-sex as a trope for disintegration, a floating signifier for the trouble with modernity ... Braidotti and Baudrillard – perhaps they would revolt against their pairing but this is partly my point – use cultural anxieties about transsexuals to mobilize sexual panic and reinvigorate normative orderings” (2010: 227).

In her auto-ethnographic study of the transsexual female, Hayward in turn locates transness as a corporeal experience rooted both in the body and in the locality. To support her position, Hayward includes an element that other cultural theorists writing about transsexual paradigms, including Baudrillard and Braidotti, manifestly avoid, by citing the testimonies of trans subjects. Referencing personal accounts by Sandy Stone and Jay Prosser among others, Hayward, a transgender woman herself, says, “Any number of autobiographical accounts by transsexuals reveal that trans-bodies are obviously real bodies, re-integrated integrities and cohesions framed by sociological, historical, and political forces and futures.”

The issue of the passivity of the transgender figure, particularly in the works of Žižek and Braidotti, is doubly evident by the distant relationship of these cultural theorists to trans lives. The absence of transgender testimonies in their analyses, in particular, replicates a gender-based form of Orientalism. Originally conceived by Edward Said to analyse representations of ‘Oriental’ figures in the Global North, specifically the representations by Western scholars of the Arab, the power-based relationship between analysing subject and dissected object is integral to the representation. As Said says, “the Orientalist as against the Oriental is that the former writes about, whereas the latter is written about. For the latter, passivity is the presumed role; for the former, the power to observe, study, and so forth” (1995: 308). The consequence for the Orientalized object is to become a fixed treatment of reduction and caricature that can never be anything more. As Said says, “Orientalism cannot develop. Indeed, it is the doctrinal antithesis of development” (307). Adapting this theory to trans subjectivity, transness, accordingly, is treated by particular cultural theorists as the illegitimate product of commodification, and nothing more. By contrast, the realness of cisgendered patriarchy within these positions, while threatened with destabilization and replacement by trans-sexed identities, according to Baudrillard, maintains an immutable quality according to Braidotti and Žižek. Citing the work of Alain Badiou, Žižek venerates monogamous patriarchy as an ineffable ideal, stating “today more than ever one should insist on a focus on love, not mere enjoyment: it is love, the encounter of the Two, which ‘transubstantiates’ idiotic masturbatory enjoyment into an event proper” (2008: 27). By contrast, Žižek describes a sensationalized event in New York City involving group masturbation, called the “masturbathon,” to frame transgender identity:

“The masturbathon is the ideal form of sex activity of this transgendered subject” (28). Yet Braidotti too draws a distinction between real and artificial, within her own “radically heterosexual project” (2002: 27), with her championing of “a radical re-appraisal of heterosexuality as the recognition of incommensurable differences” (2002: 46) and belief in the “irreducible and irreversible difference” between male and female (26). Unlike Žižek, Braidotti’s position accommodates homosexuality, but also similar to him, appears to reject the validity of transgender identity. In a statement emphasizing the “disguise” and “masquerade” of gender non-conformity, Braidotti says,

“the traces of heterosexuality on us all are undeniable. One can clearly choose to disguise this fact, to avoid all the morphological wrappings of sexual difference, such as a penis actually attached to a desiring male body ... One can sing the praises of masquerades and polyvalence, such as lesbian cross-dressers who pump iron; one can choose to emphasize all kind of prosthetic or technological alternatives, such as women with strap-on dildos and penis-less men, but that will not suffice to erase sexual difference” (2002: 46).

Unlike Baudrillard, Braidotti’s position rejects the ability of hyperreality to erase original sources of the gendered human. For Braidotti, the differences between men and women are, irrespective of the best efforts of capitalism or any other social force, irreversible: “A mere shift in the empirical referent cannot alter the somatic and psychic traces of sexual otherness. These traces are encrypted in the flesh, like a primordial memory, a genetic data-bank that pre-dates entry into linguistic representation” (46).

While Hayward’s focus on “trans-becoming,” with its legitimizing of trans female bodies, is a major influence on the perspective of this research concerning the legitimate

subjectivity of trans women, this thesis does not to discount conflicting alternatives entirely. Braidotti's position of irreducible and irreversible sexual identities is in fact unusual given her stated belief elsewhere in the fluidity of identity. Her alternating position includes, for example, an emphasis on "non-unitary, nomadic or rhizomatic" subjectivity (2006: 4), and,

"the expression of alternative representations of the subject as a dynamic non-unitary entity; it is the dramatization of processes of becoming. These processes assume that subject formation takes place in-between nature/technology; male/female; black/white; local/global; present/past – in the spaces that flow and connect the binaries" (2013: 164).

It can be argued that Braidotti's inconsistent position on non-unitary identity and "the spaces that flow and connect the binaries," with the simultaneous rejection of the legitimacy of gender nonconforming subjectivities such as trans and non-binary, is created by the clash of two pivotal influences on her work. Primarily we see the influence of Luce Irigaray's emphasis on fixed differences between the sexes, "Whatever identifications are possible, one will never exactly occupy the place of the other – they are irreducible one to the other" (1993: 12). Yet Braidotti also frequently borrows from the discourse of Gilles Deleuze with its stress on non-unitary identities (Braidotti, 2002: 15). A similar fault line appears in the work of Žižek, who at times emphasizes the unitary value of Marxist Master Signifiers to denounce the rootless, "apolitical" nature of postmodern identities in relation to economic relations (2008: 29-30, 119). Yet at other times, Žižek relies on a particular interpretation of Lacanian analysis to delegitimize trans identity for its claims of unity and legitimacy, against Žižek's counter-argument that all

identities are rootless, artificial and perverse (2019). Neither Braidotti nor Žižek are ultimately able to resolve the contradictions that emerge from these fault-lines, and it is not the claim of this thesis that a resolution is necessary. Their respective, inconsistent positions are at times in alignment with this thesis, notably Braidotti's conclusions on the importance of the body as a vital social interface of significations (1991: 219), and in regards to both Braidotti and Žižek, the commodifying nature of neoliberal / advanced / late capitalist society and its ability to incorporate difference, and resistance within its discourse (Braidotti, 2013: 58; Žižek, 1999: 271). Similarly, Baudrillard's work on hyperreality, where "the excess of information puts an end to information" (2000: 66), appears prescient in this Internet era of de-stabilized information sources. All of these positions will be utilized within this thesis at appropriate points, while the respective positions of these cultural theorists on trans subjectivity will simultaneously be challenged, Žižek's especially given that his represents the most explicit and substantial analysis attempting to delegitimize transness within an admittedly erratic fusion of Marxist and Lacanian frameworks.

Taxonomy of the transgender woman

This thesis focuses on particular representations of transgender women in the Americas, a category of identity that requires clarification given the implications of the term's origins, within a U.S. civil-rights-related movement from the 1990s. As Susan Stryker herself says of its emergence in the U.S.A around 1990, "transgender" is "a catchall term for all nonnormative forms of gender expression and identity" (2008: 123).

Stryker accordingly provides a broad definition of ‘transgender’ as “people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (trans-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender ... it is *the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place*” (1). Stryker’s definition appears useful in its potential openness and flexibility, but its conceptual origin in the U.S.A. adds to it a U.S.-centred influence that should be mediated given the potential colonizing aspect. In this respect, the perspective of Raewyn Connell and Rebecca Pearse on a growing, global interconnectivity appears helpful, with their claim,

“We are not being homogenized, as popular theories of globalization suppose. But we don’t live in a mosaic world where each culture is intact and separate. If such a world ever existed, five centuries of imperialism and a world economy have ended it” (2016: 70).

Various testimonies from different global regions such as the Indian subcontinent and the continent of Africa, for example A. Revathi’s *A Life in Trans Activism* (2016) and the study of queer Nigerian lives *She Called Me Woman* (2018), respectively underscore a developing interconnectedness and awareness of ‘transgender’ as a global civil rights movement, and/or as international catchall term. In doing so, they indicate how the term may potentially accommodate or support national and regional histories with their own distinct traditions and discourses involving gender nonconformity.

This is not to dismiss the globalizing nature of the term as problematic, however. Within the U.S.A., as an example, a precarious aspect involves its use to include people who may not describe themselves as transgender, either due to the use of another term,

and/or by active rejection. Analysing a gender nonconforming scene in New York City, David Valentine notes the preference for “gay” as a term of identity of people whose gender-nonconforming identity appears in alignment with transgender identity (2007: 3-9). Overall, Valentine concludes that in terms of research,

“I don’t think that people shouldn’t use ‘transgender’. I simply think we need to be careful about what we mean by it (or by any category), what meanings it can bring with it, and what the consequences of these might be” (27).

Valentine’s warning is relevant not only in relation to particular urban communities within the U.S.A. In relation to indigenous Americans in North America, Qwo-Li Driskill highlights Two-Spirit identity as,

“a contemporary term being used in Native communities to describe someone whose gender exists outside of colonial logic. It is an umbrella term that references Indigenous traditions for people who don’t fit into rigid gender categories. It also, depending on the context, refers to Native people who identify as Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer” (2016: 5).

Driskill highlights the complex, political tension between the usage of “Native Two-Spirit” identity and the hegemonic integration and familiarity of ‘LGBT+’ identity in accompaniment with the “trauma of language loss” (2011: 101). From this perspective, ‘transgender’ can be seen as a ‘white settler’ term of identity used to replace an almost-eradicated, approximate, or distant, indigenous equivalent. The integration of Native American and white-settler society, with the hegemonic dominance of the latter, appears to have led to adjustments by Native Americans in North American generally in the form of code-switching. At least some Native Americans adopt ‘transgender’ as a term when in

engagement with white-majority audiences, as is evident in the work of Toronto-based Mohawk artist and journalist Kiley May. May draws upon a number of labels depending on her work, including her self-reference as belonging to ‘LGBTQ2S,’ and more specifically, her identity as Two-Spirit, as queer, and as a transgender woman (K. May 2017; K. May, 2016).

Beyond North America, there is also the need for careful navigation of the ‘transgender’ label. Recognizing its value in analyzing international and transnational subjects in the Global South is the research of B Camminga and their study of transgender refugees in Africa (2019). This includes Camminga’s case study of the Malawian Tiwonge Chimbalanga, assigned male at birth but who since childhood has identified as a woman, though not always as transgender (2019: 105). Camminga’s analysis highlights how “transgender can also become something that is refuted, even though the elements of a lived experience may fulfil what would be constitutive of that experience. This version of transgender, as it applies in this context, speaks to multiplicity” (143). The reference to ‘multiplicity’ echoes the utilizing by May of different linguistic conceptions connoting transness, depending on the audience. In regards to the case of Chimbalanga, her different uses of ‘gay’ and ‘transgender’ labels when later occupying LGBT+-specific spaces as a refugee in South Africa, in an echo of Valentine’s research, highlights explicitly a fluidity of language and the way the individual mediates and moves among different social settings. Transgender, from this perspective, can be interpreted as a label that partially, rather than comprehensively, represents a gender-nonconforming subjectivity. It presents in turn a way in, from a

Eurocentric perspective, to understanding an identity that shares commonalities even as the particular labels differ.

The relevance of Camminga's analysis of the taxonomy of the 'transgender' label is not only in relation to connecting geographical and cultural difference, however. Camminga also notes its value in covering historical distance, saying, "'transgender' as a term is a relatively recent concept. Nonetheless it describes or encapsulates ways of being and identifying – variance, non-conformity or transgressiveness – that have existed for far longer than it has" (39). Camminga's perspective is particularly pertinent to this thesis in relation to the opening chapter on Lili Elbe (1882-1931), who can be similarly interpreted as a transgender figure before the label – indeed, arguably before any socially legitimizing label for gender nonconforming identity – existed at the time in Europe. Camminga's position connects in turn with the work of Michel Foucault, who analyses the historical categorization of gender-nonconforming identities first within a discourse of religious judgment and then, from the period of the Industrial Revolution, within a discourse of pathology and psychiatry (1998). Implicated in this study is an acknowledgment that gender-nonconforming individuals have, historically in Europe at least, been delegitimized through a hegemonic patriarchal discourse. 'Transgender,' in this context, provides a means of analysing people who, while sharing commonalities with transgender people today, historically have lacked an affirmative discourse, and have been restricted from constructing such a discourse of their own. As noted by Camminga and Valentine among others, what is important is that in describing Lili Elbe as a transgender woman, she should be seen as partially this, rather than comprehensively.

On the specific identity of the ‘transgender *woman*,’ there is also the need for a flexible interpretation. In this study, the representations are broadly, but not exclusively, of people who conform to Declan Henry’s definition of the transgender woman as “someone who was assigned male at birth but self-identifies as female” (2017: 25). The interchangeability of this term and definition with that of transsexuality can be seen in Julia Serano’s definition, “those of us who make the choice to live as the sex other than the one we were assigned at birth are commonly called *transsexuals*” (2016: 27). Broadly, this thesis chooses the ‘transgender’ label for its inclusion of various forms of trans ‘female/femme’ identities, except when the term ‘transsexual’ requires specific address. On this point, the thesis will also draw on the work of cultural theorists who refer to transsexuality and/or transsexual female identity in their work, when it is deemed applicable to transgender female identity.

Another broadly transgender identity addressed in this thesis is that of the Latin American identity of *travesti*. *Travesti* actress and writer Renata Carvalho describes the identity accordingly:

“Travesti is a Latin American identity, typically Brazilian and mostly linked to poverty. The travesti, the transsexual woman, and the cisgender woman, we belong to the same gender, the feminine. We understand and express ourselves through this phenotype and it is through it that we want to be treated. However, we are not women, let alone men. We are Travesti. I say this because the gender in language for a travesti is very important. In my country we often go through the discomfort of [society] insisting on treating us in the male. We are SHE” (Carvalho, 2019).

The liminality and diversity of this identity is evident in the writing of Argentinian *travesti* writer and activist Lohana Berkins, who describes the European equivalent of *travesti* as “transgender” (1995). Overall, the categories referenced by Carvalho appear to reflect Latin American conceptions for trans female/feminine identity, typified by such organizations as the Association of Argentinian Travesti, Transsexuals, and Transgender, and more general ‘GLTTTBI’ organizations in Latin America inclusive of Gay, Lesbian, Travesti, Transsexual, Transgender, Bisexual, Intersex identities (Camminga, 137). In order to accommodate this array of diversity, the transgender female in this study is inclusive of *travesti* and non-binary femmes, although these distinct identities will be acknowledged when appropriate.

However, the association with ‘woman’ in the texts of this thesis varies beyond even Latin American categories involving ‘TTT.’ In Chapter 1, the fictional character of Molina in the Argentinian novel *Kiss of the Spider Woman* identifies purely as a woman without any adjustment of a male-signifying body and male-signifying appearance, or even the abandonment of a male-identifying name and pronouns outside of close circles. In Chapter 3, in the urban setting of Santiago, Chile in the film *A Fantastic Woman*, the protagonist is described by the film’s promotional literature as a trans woman. But in the documentary *Miss Maria, Skirting the Mountain* in Chapter 6, the real-life figure of the Colombian trans woman María Luisa Fuentes in her rural location identifies as female, including use of female name, dress, and pronouns, without any apparent awareness of transgender identity or the possibilities of feminizing tools such as hormones. Elsewhere in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, two of the featured U.S.-based writers and activists identify as

trans women, while the third identifies as Two-Spirit, as trans, and as a non-binary femme while using they/them pronouns.

Cisheteropatriarchy, Intersectional Feminism, and Lacanian terminology

While this thesis adopts the position that neoliberal ideology provides a hegemonic conception for organizing, understanding, and representing society in the twenty-first-century Anglophone Global North, there is also a recognition that neoliberalism is neither intrinsically coherent nor complete and monolithic, and works with other ideologies, including those produced by majoritarian worldviews around ethnicity and gender. In the Anglophone Global North, this means neoliberalism interacting with ideologies of whiteness, and in terms of gender, cisheteropatriarchy.

On the term cisheteropatriarchy, this thesis finds the contemporary scholarship of Alison Phipps, with its explicitly trans-inclusive conception of feminism, a useful starting point. Phipps defines the idea of a society centred on male identity and privilege as “heteropatriarchy,” based upon the ideal of “the heterosexual nuclear family as an economic and reproductive unit” (2019: 8). Phipps provides an accompanying historical context, noting how, “as capitalism began to expand from the fifteenth century onwards, European colonialism and settler-colonialism exported this model of social organization into most of the world.” From this European colonialism, gender norms in the Anglophone Global North – the location at the centre of this study – have become established and consolidated.

From Phipps's definition, this thesis takes a necessary accompanying step by referencing the profound power dynamic that centres cisgender identity and marginalizes trans and other gender nonconforming identities. This thesis accordingly adapts Phipps's term with the prefix that acknowledges this power dynamic, and therefore refers to dominant notion of sexed-gender identity in the Anglophone Global North as 'cisheteropatriarchy.' In doing so, this thesis uses the prefix as conceptualized in "trans* activist discourses in the 1990s," as noted by B. Aultman, "from the Latin cis-, meaning 'on the same side as'" (2014: 61), effectively to mean non-trans people. The term, arguably popularized by Emi Koyama and Julia Serano in the first decade of the twenty-first century, is now established within trans-inclusive discourse.

In addition to the gendered framing of cisheteropatriarchy, this thesis also aligns with Phipps on the importance of integrating an intersectional framework of feminism in order to analyse the multiple forms of oppression described in this thesis, including in relation to race/ethnicity and class. As an overview, intersectionality can be said to have been popularized as a contemporary, conceptual term in Kimberlé Crenshaw's study in relation to the law's failure to accommodate the situations of women of colour and the multiple forms of oppression they can simultaneously face. Crenshaw for example argues that "intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (1989: 140). As a feminist concept that recognizes multiple forms of female experience and related oppression, it has also become a term used to describe the multiple oppressions experienced by trans female bodies, including misogyny and distinct forms of homophobia and transphobia, as well as

racism. In this broader sense, Naomi Klein, for example, describes an “intersectionality framework” as “identifying how multiple issues – race, gender, income, sexuality, physical ability, immigration status, language – intersect and overlap within an individual’s life experience, and also within structures of power” (2017: 99-100). Similarly, Phipps adopts “the principle of intersectionality” as part of her critique of transphobia and racism within feminism, and its recognition of how “White and privileged women dominate mainstream feminism” (2020: 6). In acknowledgment of her debt to Black feminism, Phipps says that her intersectional feminism focuses on the “intersecting systems: heteropatriarchy, racial capitalism, and colonialism” (7). As stated already, the value of this mode of feminism allows not only for a framework that accepts trans female subjectivity and the multiple oppressions likely to be experienced, but also acknowledges how transness alone is not necessarily enough for understanding the oppressions experienced by trans women, specifically in the case of this research the lives of socio-economically disadvantaged trans women of colour. Intersectional feminism allows this research to put class and race/ethnicity front and centre with gender, and this is pivotal for understanding the oppressions experienced by trans women, and especially trans women of colour, in relation to neoliberalism.

Finally, this thesis on occasion utilizes – or critiques – ideas by theorists in alignment with Lacanian analysis, including in relation to Laura Mulvey and her theory of the Male Gaze, and two theorists of postmodern culture relating to neoliberalism, namely Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek. In being acutely aware of the potentially esoteric nature of Lacanian analysis, as well as its inconsistent application across a range of scholarship, I will accordingly limit my use of Lacanian ideas to occasional references

to the triadic concept describing the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real. This thesis finds it useful to adopt as a starting point, Richard Boothby's comparison with the better-known Freudian psychical processes of *superego* (Lacanian approximation: the Symbolic), the *ego* (approx. the Imaginary), and *id* (approx. the Real) (1996: 348-358). In acknowledgment of Lacan's development of these terms, however, this thesis accepts Lacan's emphasis on the dominance of the Symbolic process of language and ideology in the construction of meaning, in which "the things of the human world are things in a universe structured by words, that language, symbolic processes, dominate and govern all" (1992: 45). Elsewhere, the Lacanian definition of the Real as corresponding to the language-less condition of "trauma" (Lacan, 2016: 112), and for the Imaginary, involving "the principle illusions" of "wholeness" and "autonomy" (Evans, 1996: 82) will serve as the foundational meaning on the few occasions they are referenced.

Chapter 1

When the Cisgender Gaze Fails to See the Transgender Body: *Kiss of the Spider Woman* *Woman*



Molina, played by William Hurt, in Kiss of the Spider Woman (1985)

Introduction and background: (1) a military-neoliberal overthrowing of democracy, and (2) the construction of a queer, gender nonconforming character through a Cisheteropatriarchal Gaze

In 1976, Argentine author Manuel Puig published his novel *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, centering two prisoners, Valentin and Molina, one a chauvinistic leftist revolutionary, the other an apolitical, gender-nonconforming deviant, locked up together by an apparently authoritarian regime. It was in part a reflection of events at the time. In the same year of publication, Argentina's democratically elected Peronist Presidency was overthrown by a U.S.-supported military regime, with political subversives and cultural undesirables either thrown into jail or disappeared. Naomi Klein says of the forces behind

the usurpation of democracy, “there was no mistaking the fact that the coup represented a revolt of the elites, a counterrevolution against forty years of gains by Argentina’s workers” (2007: 88). The text in this case emerges during the era that witnessed the birth of neoliberalism in the Americas during the 1960s and 1970s. The era saw a succession of countries, notably Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile, succumb to covert, U.S.-sponsored military uprisings that combined neoliberal economists trained by the U.S.A.’s Chicago School (Klein, 2007: 60-88) with the brutal suppression of large swathes of its population. This includes the persecution of LGBT+ communities and the suppression of women’s rights as part of transnational “culture wars” (B. Cowan, 2016: 8). Meanwhile, as these crackdowns occurred, neoliberal theorist Milton Friedman worked as an economics advisor to the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet (Klein, 2007: 7; Guardiola-Rivera, 2013: 379), in the drive to establish conditions that would become the hallmarks of neoliberal societies today. These include deregulation and privatization, minimal mechanisms of wealth redistribution, and huge spending on militarized police and carceral justice to crush dissent at the growing inequality (Klein, 9; Guardiola-Rivera, 379-80). In effect, we see the enduring divergence between two social visions. Oscar Guardiola-Rivera describes it accordingly,

“[on the one hand, a neoliberal] conception of human rights as purely individual rights claimed in advance of the state, and in particular rights to property and industry ... in many ways counter to another conception of human rights as people’s rights, closer to the establishment of the right to self-determination and a moral politics of solidarity at the heart of Third World discourses of liberation” (2013: 381).

Yet in spite of this febrile, political background, Puig's novel is not overtly political, and in fact exists outside of its historical context. Its occlusion of historical events in turn can be described as indicative of its appeal to audiences in the politically conservative, Anglophone Global North since the late 1970s and 1980s. Lisa Duggan notes how this era is characterized by a variety of anti-LGBT+ strategies in the Anglophone Global North, typified by in the U.K. by Clause [or 'Section'] 28 and in the U.S.A. by the Briggs Initiative. This latter strategy permitted "the firing of any school employee who engaged in 'advocating, soliciting, imposing, encouraging, or promoting of private or public homosexual activity directed at, or likely to come to the attention of, school children and/or other employees'" (Duggan, 1994: 7). In this era, concurrently, the Male Gaze conceptualized by Laura Mulvey can be described more broadly as uncompromisingly Cisheteropatriarchal. As Mulvey says of the symbolic and plot-driven subordination of the female on screen,

"Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (1999: 834).

Adjusting this subordinated positioning, the trans woman can accordingly be said to stand for the signifier for the cisgender other, reinforcing cisgendered normality by her own mode of an increasingly silent and marginalized image within a castration narrative. The trans female body in this way inhabits a decline from male to female that becomes less even than female, being inherently unsuitable for procreation or even good health, as she wastes away via an excruciating physical agony towards social, professional, or literal

death. On the construction of the subordination of the female on screen, Mulvey identifies three elements involving the interacting characters, the camera, and the audience, or as Mulvey says, “that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final products, and that of that characters at each other within the screen illusion” (1999: 843). This construction of delegitimization is not, however, to say that the process of subordination and ultimate tragedy is necessarily unsympathetic – the very tragedy in fact depends on generating audience sympathy, and this is true of the character of Molina in the novel and film. Nevertheless, Molina’s tragic ending, involving their ultimate abandonment of the Freudian Pleasure Principle for the Death Drive, underscores the novel’s often explicit Freudian discourse that shapes the respective fates of the two central characters according to a Male and, especially in Molina’s case, Cisgender Gaze.

In this respect, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is a text representative of the early era of the neoliberal Anglophone Global North. LGBT+ identities remain deviant, and in this respect, the cinematic portrayal is arguably a courageous one. However, the Freudian frame and the filmic interpretation of Molina as explicitly a gay man also highlights how at this point, there is little place for the trans female body, a possibility that is toyed with in Molina’s characterization in the novel. We are, with these texts, a long way away from the representations of trans female bodies to come especially in the 2010s, characterized with such affirmation by Eva Hayward as “the somatic sociality of trans-becoming,” which involves the “emergence of a material, psychological, sensual, and social self through corporeal, spatial, and temporal processes that trans-form the lived body” (2010: 226). Beyond reminding us of the dominance of the Cisgender Gaze at this stage in the

neoliberal Anglophone Global North, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*'s profundity arguably comes with its nuanced portrayal of misogyny, and its discernible connection to homophobia and transphobia. Valentin's recognition of his misogyny is arguably the story's most affirming legacy. The novel and film in turn highlight how far trans representations have come, and within a climate of culture war, how far they may again fall.

Deconstructing Molina's Unconvincing Transgender / Gender-nonconforming Gaze: some perspectives

Is Molina trans or just transgressive? Regarding the protagonist of the original novelized version of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, the evidence for either is inconclusive. In that novel, Molina is referred to by others throughout as a homosexual man (1991: 44, 203, 243, 264-279), having been interned in a men's prison for the crime of having same-sex relations with a minor (17). This imprisonment within a men's prison need not exclude the claims of Molina as trans; Chelsea Manning, Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, and CeCe McDonald are just some of the more high-profile, real-life transgender women to have been incarcerated in men's prisons in recent times (Gossett et al., 2017: 23-37). Furthermore, Jessica Burke (2007) and Jonathan Allan (2014) draw on textual possibilities concerning Molina's ambiguous gender identity to suggest transgender characteristics, noting how Molina identifies as female throughout the story, often elaborately and with conviction (44, 203). This possibility is accentuated in the movie

adaptation (1985), of which the actor William Hurt states about his performance, “Molina isn’t really gay ... he’s a woman” (‘The Making of Kiss of the Spider Woman,’ 44.20). This perspective of the actor, as well as the consistent self-referencing by Molina in the novel and the film, ought to provide as a starting point a sufficient reason to see Molina as a potential trans protagonist. Yet it is also necessary to ask what kind of trans, given the parameters and definitions shaped at the time by the large body of media stories, biography and trans-related academia in South America and beyond, from Argentinian *travesti* such as Lohana Berkins and Marlene Wayar to Brazilian model Roberta Close. Partly due to Molina’s obscure connection to these and other trans women, Molina will be referred to in this essay by the non-binary pronouns they/them. For it is unclear whether Molina was ever intended to be a transgender figure by the standards of real-life experience at the time of publishing and film release, or a literary, cisgender imagining of transness for narrative effect. This essay will argue it is the latter that Molina more closely represents. In turn, this mode of transness contributes to a narrative similarly exemplified by the musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), in which transness represents the incomplete Man needing to combine both masculinity and femininity, and whose denouement involves the casting aside of transness in a final act of maturity and completion.

The representation of Molina as a transgender character in fact varies in the different versions of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. It is for this reason that this essay will analyse two markedly different forms: the original novel (1976) and the film adaptation (1985). It is by noting the challenges of the film adaptation in producing the character of

Molina that this essay will highlight in this section the impact of appearance and visual/aural recognition to gender identity.

Queer, then, rather than trans, Molina's representation is playful in the way that Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) and in particular John Cameron Mitchell's film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001) also deal with the idiosyncrasies of gender via inversion and subversion. In this respect, the feminine character of Molina and their opposite, the masculine Valentin, are in familiar company, arguably as two incomplete halves of a whole. As Juliet Mitchell says,

“Both men and women live out in their mental life the great difficulty that there are men and women. Only in their wildest dreams can they resolve the dilemma as Aristophanes does with his laughing seriousness in Plato's *Symposium*, where an original hermaphroditism solves the problem as all of us both desire and dread” (1990: 50).

More significant than as a trans character, Molina is important for their involvement in what Jaime Manrique calls a “sokratic” investigation of gender with their cellmate, Valentin (1999: 41). In its representation of two prison cellmates, idealistic proletarian Valentin and cynical bourgeois Molina, the one suggestively rugged and ascetic, the other viewed by their cellmate as self-indulgent and effeminate, a series of binaries is established as they verbally engage with each other. Uncannily, in fact, given the separation by its prior time and setting, Manuel Puig's novel and the film adaptation appear to both engage with and challenge Slavoj Žižek's critique of transgender identity – as one of several ‘minority’ identities viewed by Žižek as an expression of postmodern, ‘late-capitalist’ society (2012: 15). Through analysing the sokratic interrogation of

Valentin, we can see arguably the most profound significance of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* not as a story about Molina's possible transgender identity but one that challenges Valentin's supposedly revolutionary assumptions about queer identities. This includes the possibility of supposedly liberatory movements replicating rather than replacing oppressive cisheteropatriarchal hegemonies through the lack of appreciation of the disempowered Other – in this case personified by the queer/trans character. A second argument of this essay, therefore, is that *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is less a convincing portrayal of trans identity than of transphobia and misogyny, and the self-reflection needed to challenge these prejudices.

Deconstructing the Dissatisfying Freudian Framework Used to Portray Molina's Conservative Notion of Womanhood

According to definitions from the twenty-first century, transgender identity is built partly on a spectrum of labels and concepts that existed at the time of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1976; 1985), from transvestite to transsexual, with the latter's relationship with gender dysphoria (Stryker and Whittle, 2006: 4). Declan Henry's definition appears to narrow the concept of a transgender woman to a synonym of the transsexual female: "A trans woman is someone who was assigned male at birth but self-identifies as female and therefore transitions from male to female (MTF). Once transitioned, she may refer to herself as a woman with a trans history" (2017: 25). In this definition, we see a transgender definition reach a single, relatively static outcome. It

involves both a psychological and somatic connection to female identity that indicates a movement from one to the other. Yet Maggie Nelson questions the danger of excluding more diverse forms of lived experience. Writing in reference to her husband Harry Dodge, she says,

“‘trans’ may work well enough as shorthand, but the quickly developing mainstream narrative it evokes (‘born in the wrong body,’ necessitating an orthopaedic pilgrimage between two fixed destinations) is useless for some – but partially, or even profoundly, useful for others? That for some, ‘transitioning’ may mean leaving one gender entirely behind, while for others – like Harry, who is happy to identify as a butch on T – it doesn’t? I’m not on my way anywhere, Harry sometimes tells inquirers. How to explain, in a culture frantic for resolution, that sometimes the shit stays messy?” (2015: 65).

Nelson’s description highlights a gap between self-conception and externally ascribed definition. Nevertheless, the reference to ‘T’ – the ingestion of testosterone to alter and sustain hormonal effects – confirms both a degree of alteration and a psychological and somatic relationship with an identified gender identity. The implicit involvement of changing gender-signifiers also reaffirms Susan Stryker’s suggestively open-ended definition, “In any case, it is *the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place*” (2008: 1). What the contributions of Stryker and Nelson/Dodge suggest is that trans can exist in diverse ways in terms of self-conception, including potentially those experimented on the page by writers such as Puig, but psychosomatic elements are involved to a greater or lesser degree.

Molina's female identification, regardless, does not conform to the definitions and descriptions provided by Henry, Nelson or Stryker. Molina's transness appears tied more to Freudian-driven cisheteropatriarchy and fixed sexual roles that determine whether one is male or female. Themes of Freudian castration abound, for example, particularly in the novel. To refer back to a definition of castration by Juliet Mitchell, who includes the Lacanian concept of the *phallus* and which can be read here as interchangeable with the idea of *male privilege*: "At the phallic stage, the girl realizes she is without the phallus and proceeds to envy it. The boy, seeing the female's lack, fears the possible loss of his own" (1990: 87). In the novel, Valentin draws on this conception and the accompanying anxiety of loss of male privilege. He connects the latter with authority and independence while discussing the lead male character in a film being described by Molina. "His mother castrated him," says Valentin, "plain and simple ... If he's left all his mother's stuff in the house just the way it was, it's because he still wants to be a little boy, back in his mama's house, and what he brings home with him isn't a woman, it's a playmate" (1991: 17-18). The concept of the castrated male here is characterized by Valentin as immature and lacking in fortitude. Later, Valentin describes his own apparently fractious relationship with his mother, "If only she hadn't started acting that way ... like some castrating mother" (139). For Valentin, castration anxiety is harnessed as a contrast to the virtues of self-reliance that Valentin admires. For Molina, who lived with his mother prior to his jail sentence, the relationship with the concept is more an embrace. Molina makes sense of their sexuality and gender, in fact, by reference to the proximity of their relationship with their mother: "How they spoiled me too much as a kid, and that's why I'm the way I am, how I was tied to my mother's apron strings and I'm this way" (19).

This perspective is later elaborated on in the author's footnotes, particularly the reference to the work of Otto Fenichel, whose position describes how "the probability of a homosexual orientation increases the more the male child identifies with his mother" (137). Molina accordingly appears to have embraced a sexual gender identity that conforms to the Freudian daughter-figure as defined by Mitchell. Mitchell, for example, states that,

"for the girl acceptance of 'castration' indicates that she should become *like* her mother ... Finally, if by exploiting 'her passive instinctual impulses' – that is, the passive aims of her sexual drive – she can transfer her sexual attentions from her mother to her father, she can want first his phallus, and then by the all-important analogy, his baby, then the man again, to give her this baby" (111, 96-97).

Yet this Oedipal analysis conforms to only part of Molina's narrative, with the desire for procreation being absent from Molina's apparent aspirations and desires. What is present is the rejection of the male privilege Molina was born into. This Freudian position, adopted both in the novel's footnotes and reiterated by Molina, includes an intense connection with the mother, replicating the mother-daughter relationship described by Freud. Molina, according to this subtext, appears to have embraced the 'happiness script' of a girl born into patriarchy, with desire for completion via partnering with a heterosexual man. As Sara Ahmed says, "following such scripts is what orients subjects toward heterosexuality: for girls, you must become a woman by finding your happiness in the happiness of 'a good man'" (2010: 90). Molina's desire accordingly is to become, as Ahmed describes it, the "happy housewife" (50), part of a dynamic where "Heterosexual love becomes about the possibility of a happy ending; about what life is

aimed toward, as being what gives life direction or purpose” (90). Molina’s overarching desire is to be in a romantic, monogamous, sexual relationship with a heterosexual man (1991: 44):

Molina: But how marvelous when a couple loves each other for a lifetime.

Valentin: You’d really go for that?

Molina: It’s my dream.

Valentin: So why do you like men then?

Molina: What’s that got to do with it? ... I’d like to marry a man for the rest of my life.

Valentin: So you’re a regular bourgeois gentleman at heart, eh, Molina?

Molina: Bourgeois lady, thank you.

Molina’s transness here appears to be a sexual status rather than a psychosomatic identity expressing aspirations of signifying ‘woman.’ In the novel particularly, Molina defines their gender not in terms of alteration to female significations – be it by their name, their clothing or their body – but solely in terms of forming a monogamous, sexually passive relationship with a man within the institution of marriage. This is consistent with Molina’s identifications throughout the novel and ignores a gender matrix inclusive of corporeal signification. This narrowed impression of female identity is notable in blocking out many of the kinds of significations identified by Rosi Braidotti, in which the gendered “body is then an interface, a threshold, a field of intersecting material and symbolic forces: it is a surface where multiple codes (race, sex, class, age, etc) are

inscribed” (2002: 25). For Braidotti, the function of the body as gendered interface cannot be disavowed or ignored, its ability to signal gender too multi-faceted and profound. The erasure of one’s signifying gender identity, Braidotti says, or even a “mere shift in the empirical referent cannot alter the somatic and psychic traces of sexual otherness. These traces are encrypted in the flesh, like a primordial memory, a genetic data-bank that pre-dates entry into linguistic representation” (46).

Braidotti here is articulating the kind of awareness of psychical and somatic elements that consistently appear in transgender narratives in the Global North, from Lili Elbe (1933) to Harry Dodge and the reference by Maggie Nelson to chest-binding and testosterone injections (2015: 38). Yet in the Global South too, Argentinian trans narratives produced by well-known *travesti* such as Marlene Wayar and Lohana Berkins acknowledge this relationship with visual appearance. Berkins for example notes the dissonance between the female significations of her clothing and the potential clash of bodily male significations:

“We have physical and cultural differences from women. The physical differences create in us unique experiences ... people get caught up in the clothes we wear and they struggle to see beyond that where there is a human being. Society focuses on the image” (1995).

A social tendency is recognized here, at least partly acknowledging an investment in the interface and the presenting of significations of gendered identity, with the factor of social recognition being essential. Recognition and personal fulfilment appear to be connected; Ahmed for example notes how an individual’s happiness “is not just how subjects speak of their own desires but also what they want to give and receive from

others. Happiness involves reciprocal forms of aspiration” (2010: 92). More than just connected to happiness, however, are connections between recognition and self-definition, as moulded within the Symbolic. Catriona Mackenzie says,

“There are two crucial ways in which social recognition is necessary for self-definition. First, it is necessary because self-knowledge is crucial to self-definition and because we achieve self-knowledge in social relationships ... Second, social recognition is necessary for self-definition because a sense of self-worth is necessary to the achievement of a reflective equilibrium among the different aspects of the self ... agents are motivated to act only if they have a conception of their actions as effective, as making a difference” (2005: 290-291).

Transgender identification, following these positions of Ahmed’s and Mackenzie’s as well as more generally that of Lacanian analysis, also connects to transgender aspiration: the desire to be recognized by the Other as that with which you identify, and to act effectively to elicit signs of the desired identification. As Lacan says of this relationship between subject and Other, “‘I’m a man,’ which at most can mean no more than, ‘I’m like he whom I recognize to be a man, and so recognize myself as being such.’ In the last resort, these various formulas are to be understood only in reference to the truth of ‘I is an other’” (1997: 23). To fail to accomplish recognition with both imagined and real-life Other is potentially to create a profound – and arguably traumatic – form of split, between Symbolic and Imaginary.

Are there positions – forms of agency – that might allow Molina to exist as a woman, in spite of the general absence of recognition within the Symbolic? Possible identifications with female identity in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* are to a degree

constricted by circumstances within the Symbolic. Molina's social identity, in relation to recognition, is already restricted by their location in an all-male prison. This contributes to an incongruity and a dissonance concerning their social identity, one treated ambivalently by Molina's apparent lack of perturbation. Can an individual like Molina maintain without anxiety or despair an identity at odds with the one re-iterated via constant, daily interpellation? As Janetta Johnson and Toshio Meronek say of the real-world experiences of transgender women in the U.S.A. incarcerated in male prisons, the constant nomination as male appears likely to have some kind of debilitating impact:

“Inside, trans women are routinely referred to using male pronouns. This verbal anti-trans violence, which many trans girls experienced outside, only gets worse inside prison. If someone lived as a woman prior to prison, misgendering them feels like an attack, and their basic instinct is to get ready to fight. This feeling of always having to be on the defensive is mentally and physically draining” (2015: 262-263).

Molina's lack of stated regard, or even occasional agitation, concerning female signification appears anomalous, at least if we are to compare them with other arguably transgressive gender expressions in prison from the Americas. Prior to the concept of transgender identity, *inversion* is described in non-/fiction and scientific literature in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries in the Global North combining notions of gender/sexuality without the emphasis on corporeal transformation (Havelock Ellis, 2008). Explored through the character of Stephen Gordon in the 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness (TWOL)*, Stephen neither uses nor desires to use any form of treatment to alter their physical appearance. They distance themselves from the gender ascribed at birth,

whether in childhood – “I must be a boy, ‘cause I feel exactly like one” (1982: 14) – or in adulthood – “All my life I’ve never felt like a woman, and you know it” (228). Similar to Stephen, Molina identifies with gender as a social status rather than the physical embodiment. Yet even in *TWOL* the factors of appearance and recognition are deemed sufficiently telling as signifiers to be mentioned to the reader, in terms of Stephen’s “Mannish” clothing and manner (180). Indeed, we are told that men stare and nudge each other when seeing her (185), and that Stephen possesses the masculine features of her father as well as a gruff voice (167, 159). For the writer of *TWOL*, Radclyffe Hall, her accompanying short story *Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself* (1934) emphasises further the sense of psychosomatic dissonance within inversion. The protagonist Miss Ogilvy, who laments in her fifties, ““My God! If only I were a man! ... if only I had been a man!”” (1934: 10), finds inner-peace through a moment of mystical transcendence: repressed memories come to her of a past life as a bronze-age man with a female lover (25). On recollecting her core identity, she passes away. A form of essentialism is therefore imagined to make sense of her desire and *raison d’être*. It is here that we see parallels in Hall’s most overtly ‘transgender’ character and the characteristics described by Henry (2017): of an individual identification at odds with their gendered body, yearning to be able to signify their gendered otherness through the corporeal interface from the binary opposite.

A different form of trans identity connected explicitly to sexuality and cisheteropatriarchy as expressed by Molina is that of the Latin American *travesti*. It is important to stress the liminality and potential variability of the identity; Lohana Berkins describes how *travesti* can be equated in “other countries [as] *transgender*” (1995), while

the celebrated Brazilian *travesti* Roberto Close underwent gender reassignment surgery, thereby aligning more with a transsexual narrative (Kulick, 1998: 7). However, research by Don Kulick reveals distinctive communities that share an ethos with Molina. Kulick says of one Brazilian *travesti* community,

“The fundamental difference is that whereas the northern Euro-American gender system is based on anatomical sex, the gender system that structures travestis’ perceptions and actions is based on *sexuality* ... The core of their subjective experience of themselves is that they are attracted to men” (227, 221).

The attraction to men is one parallel to Molina’s own self-conception as female. Another is the relative veneration of the heterosexual male. Kulick notes in his interviews with *travesti* subjects a recurring self-conception:

“Keila explained to me that one of the reasons for having a boyfriend was to have ‘a masculine presence’ that one can respect, because it is ‘a little superior to you – even if you are the master of the situation, and pay all the bills’ ... Travestis think that men should dominate women ... A travesti broadcasts this domination to other travestis, so that they will envy her for having a boyfriend who cares enough about her to order her around and make pronouncements about her clothing and behaviour” (127, 132).

Travesti, then, similar to Molina, venerate the heterosexual male as their master. As Molina says, “But if a man is ... my husband, he has to give the orders, so he will feel right. That’s the natural thing, because that makes him the ... man of the house” (243). Another parallel is the language and community, suggesting that the identification is less

an idiosyncratic individual quirk, or a form of delusion, than an acknowledged social identity, at least via subculture. Molina frequently refers to their companions as “harlots” and “faggots” (60, 203), similar to the ostensibly pejorative labels embraced by *travesti* culture of “*bicha*, *mona*, and *viado*” which as Kulick says, signify “‘homosexual’ or ‘fag,’ and all words that travestis habitually and (usually) nonpejoratively use in talking to one another” (40).

Yet if Molina shares a self-conception with *travesti* identity based on sexuality, there are also distinct differences that underscore an apparent paradox at the centre of Molina’s female identification and desire only to be with heterosexual men. One noticeable difference is the *travesti* culture of altering their appearance to meet ideals of female beauty, thereby making them desirable to heterosexual men. As Kulick says, *travesti*,

“adopt female names, clothing styles, hairstyles, cosmetic practices, and linguistic pronouns, and they ingest large amounts of female hormones and pay other travestis to inject up to twenty liters of industrial silicone directly into their bodies in order to acquire feminine bodily features such as breasts, wide hips, large thighs, and, most importantly, expansive buttocks” (5).

Visual signification, therefore, is acutely valued and adhered to. In a second key departure from Molina, *travesti* identify not as women but as homosexuals (ibid); indeed, as Kulick’s study observes, *travesti* “think that any male who claims to be a woman is suffering from a psychosis” (191). The considerable efforts by *travesti* to develop a female-looking body are in fact the “desire to embody homosexuality” (224), and to create the ideal appearance that will be attractive to heterosexual men. Female-as-entity,

therefore, is neither glamorized nor even valued by *travesti* communities as it is by Molina. It is, as Kulick says instead, the grudging standard and the model of competition for *travesti* in their bid to attract heterosexual men (203). Returning to the idea of gender as a variable quality, rather than entity, *travesti* appear to identify more with “the feminine” rather than as women (Carvalho, 2019). This leads to the paradox surrounding Molina’s transness. Latin American *travesti*, unlike Molina, are committed to constructing a somatic female appearance for themselves in order to attract and enjoy heterosexual men. Molina and their fellow “females” similarly desire heterosexual men who would in turn desire cisgender women: “faggots, like I am ... what we’re always waiting for ... is like a friendship or something, with a more serious person ... with a man, of course” (203). Yet without the outward appearance, either in terms of styling and clothing on the one hand or somatic alterations via hormones and/or silicon on the other, Molina appears to have constructed a sexual identity that has little hope of fulfilment with the object of desire. Celibacy, it appears, is simultaneously the accepted and undesired outcome. In the novel, Molina’s recounting of their unrequited desire for one particular man, a waiter, underscores this effect:

“I told him everything, when I still had some hope of convincing him that, with us two ... something might really ... happen ... But nothing, nothing ever happened, no convincing him on that score. I said to him, even just one time in his whole life ... but he never wanted to” (69).

Molina’s gender/sexual identity has poetic overtones of the quixotic: romantic and idealistic to degrees that leave them suffering and unfulfilled. As they say in the film at one point, their happiness is bound up in waiting for “a man, a real man, but that can’t

happen because what he wants is a real woman” (35.13). What Molina’s plight suggests is that regardless of whether the conception of gender is fixed more to sexuality than anatomy, the value of corporeal signification is crucial in different ways to being acceptable to the Other. What inversion, *travesti* culture, and transgender women all appear to have in common to a greater or lesser degree, regardless of era or paradigm, is an appreciation of visual appearance as interface and as signifier. The status of Molina as a convincingly transgender figure, with this factor in mind, is undermined by real-life examples which highlight the importance of recognition, corporeal signification, and appearance. In the first transgender memoir, Lili Elbe’s *Man Into Woman* in 1933, the overpowering anxieties created by the element of recognition and rejection by the Other are revealed:

“She would weep for hours for fear of the life outside, of this life which seemed to her like an enemy. There her secret would be rudely unveiled, and she would be regarded as a phenomenon. Her fate would be the subject of vulgar gossip; she would be stared at, and she would not be left in peace” (2004: 178).

More modern biographical accounts like those in *Tranny* by Laura Jane Grace detail even further the self-loathing produced by the disconnect and dissonance between self-identification and somatic alterity. Anxiety emerges in consideration of how an attempt to bridge the gap in some form would turn the subject into a freak to others and even to the subject themselves:

“If I were to say how I really feel, What I really think, People would think I was mentally ill. Cross-dressing feels like self-mutilation. I can never be anything more than a pervert dressed up in women’s clothes. So sick, sick, sick. I want to

black it all out. I do not care if I am alive or dead ... I'm repulsed by the sight of my own body hair. It's happened to me before. Comes and goes in waves. Have I lost my mind? Estranged. Deranged. Perverted" (2017: 74, 196).

These sentiments, the depth of despair and self-loathing they capture with their acute awareness between psychical identification and somatic affect are absent in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. If transgender identity is to any degree reflective of even Stryker's apparently open-ended definition, "*the movement across a socially imposed boundary*," then in failing to capture any of the feelings of dread or anxiety of a figure ascribed male at birth identifying with female identity, Molina is transgender in oddly quixotic and paradoxical terms that appear superficial and only partially represented.

The Physicality of Trans Female Subjectivity: ignored in the book, avoided in the film

Exacerbating the distance between Molina and trans identity as lived experience is a broader picture of the relationship between trans identity, recognition, and appearance. Beyond the record of isolated biographies and memoirs, global analyses note similar psychosomatic dynamics within trans identity. For those who most explicitly identify as 'women' – namely transgender/transsexual women – the body-as-interface is viewed as a key element of their identity. As Cary Costello says of both the dissonance in trans identity between psychical identification and somatic signification, and the desire to connect them, "Our non-conforming bodies evoke horror, pity, fascination, and disgust;

we are pushed toward conformity by the scalpel and the law, by street harassment and stares, by discrimination, social isolation, and violence” (2016: 84). Raewyn Connell and Rebecca Pearse similarly note that, “Experiences of contradictory embodiment are central in transsexual women’s lives” (2016: 109). The dissonance is potentially jarring because of the socially ingrained associations between gender identity and physical cues that signify either male or female identity. As Connell and Pearse say of the apparent quality of the connection,

“In everyday life we take gender for granted. We instantly recognize a person as a man or woman, girl or boy ... These arrangements are so familiar that they can seem part of the order of nature. Belief that gender distinction is ‘natural’ makes it scandalous when people don’t follow the pattern” (2016: 5).

The consequence for the transgender person upon recognizing the dissonance is a “powerful ‘central contradiction’ ... This fact is totally at odds with what everyone around knows, and with what the transsexual woman knows too, being also recognizable as a man” (109). This dissonance, as Connell and Pearse say, can be mitigated by various strategies and treatments, from hormones to surgery, but in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, these anxieties and treatments are absent.

The importance of visual/aural clues in relation to gender and recognition underlines how the film adaptation of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* has a greater challenge than the novel. This includes making Molina simultaneously a character who signifies female identity, or at least androgyny, while the actor playing Molina produces potentially male significations of the visual variety; to recall the words of Connell and Pearse, “We instantly recognize a person as a man or woman, girl or boy.” It is worth

noting that the sensitive rendering of a somatic gender identification necessary in the film is largely ignored in the novel, not least because the medium of literature allows it. The novel's non-pictorial style, with its emphasis on dialogue and minimal 3rd person narrative, veils much of the added gender dynamics inescapably present on screen. This is an effect intensified in the novel by the restriction of social space to Valentin and Molina in a prison cell; there are few intruders to add a 3rd person perspective with accompanying use of pronouns. Allan notes, furthermore, how in the original Spanish-language version of the novel, "Molina adopts feminine language" that draws on the gendered grammar of the Spanish language, for example Molina's use of "feminine adjectives" (2014: 76). As a relatively disembodied character in the written iteration of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, Molina's potential femaleness is more achievable. Writers such as Jeanette Winterson and Patricia Duncker, indeed, have exploited the cover afforded by literary storytelling in their respective works *Written on the Body* (1992) and *Hallucinating Foucault* (1996) to disguise the gender of their protagonists in a way that would be far more difficult on screen.

It is the film adaptation that confronts an issue – indeed a source of anxiety – experienced by the transgender female. Namely, it is the issue of how to signify femaleness within a social environment, in which gender appears to rely partly on the kind of somatic cues identified by Braidotti. While the actor William Hurt is able to articulate the spoken, scripted expression that might signify female identity on paper, his ability to physically signify femaleness is compromised by the male significations of his body. As the film's director, Héctor Babenco, recounts when meeting Hurt for the first time: "You look like a soccer player, you have a gigantic body, plenty of muscles, you

could easily be a boxer” (‘The Making of Kiss of the Spider Woman,’ 41.47). Babenco’s initial reservations on seeing Hurt were such that he considered swapping the two actors playing Valentin and Molina, with Hurt becoming the masculine Valentin (42.00).

Similarly the choreographer Mara Borba, who was tasked with helping Hurt develop a more feminine body language, was initially sceptical that Hurt could successfully signify female identity: “I watched Bill for a while and said to myself, ‘It’s impossible’” (42.45).

Preparatory work between Borba and Hurt became key to a performance that was later celebrated at the Academy Awards in 1986, with Hurt winning Best Actor for a sufficiently convincing performance as the feminine Molina. Yet the utilization of a somatic language was an aspect of performativity that required careful training, as Borba says:

“He quickly realized it wasn’t about a mask. It’s about a deeper understanding of femininity. A universal femininity ... So at first we worked with that concept, and it was a beautiful thing, because in our collaboration we really became like two women” (44.27).

Hurt similarly speaks of the integral role played by Borba in his being able to more successfully signify a female identity: “We would analyse the difference between a woman’s pelvic area and a man’s, and the way the spine works ... and she understood it all ... She was the one who helped me find Molina” (44.20, 43.48). Hurt’s reflection here indicates how gender is constructed not just in verbal but also non-verbal cues. Beyond the femininity of Molina’s movement are added sections of dialogue. These appear to emphasise a sense of dissonance between identification and body, though also the resistance by Valentin to Molina’s conception of being anything other than male (43.38):

Valentin: (Pressing down on Molina) What's this between your legs? Tell me, lady!

Molina: It's an accident. If I had the courage, I'd cut it off.

Valentin: You'd still be a man. A man!

The language of gender dysphoria, absent in the novel, is sign-posted here in the film to help the audience make sense of both Molina as a male-embodied non-male, and Valentin's initial discomfort with Molina's female identification. Elsewhere, a series of visual/aural additions have been added to overcome Molina's somatically male signifiers and produce signifiers of stereotypical femaleness. These range from actions, such as Molina sewing (21.49), to props including Molina's array of cosmetics, earrings, hand mirror and hair clips, the doll on Molina's bed, and the range of women's tops that Molina wears along with their silk kimono and towel worn as a turban. In terms of space, Molina's bed is shielded by bright pink blankets and women's scarves, hung on washing lines that appear in the opening shot of the film like threads of a web-like washing line. Later, we see the suggestion of domestic-related knowledge through Molina's sense of detail and care with food – for example with cakes and sweets. The film also adds scenes involving Molina's trans/queer community outside of prison, with the inclusion of an on-stage female impersonator at a cabaret/gay club – as if to underscore how Molina moves in circles where female impersonation, at least, is celebrated. Molina is addressed in the club on one occasion with female pronouns and with the feminization of their name – 'Luisa.' However, Molina presents as male in the club and in every other scene, suggesting the use of female pronouns is a form of community code indicating Molina's homosexuality.

Such a utilization of environment to express femininity – and potentially, homosexuality – is an important part of Molina’s ability to signify queerness in the film. On the relationship between the trans subject and their environment, Eva Hayward’s account of the transitioning transsexual as “spider-woman” imagines a conception of trans-becoming, involving “enfleshing, enfolding elements of her environment within herself and expressing parts of herself back into the environment as part of her transition” (2010: 238). Molina, as stated, maintains their interface of male somatic significations as far as the recognition of others is concerned both inside and outside of prison, but Hayward’s exploration does highlight the possibilities for gendered expression by including the factor of environment, as a spider defines its space. As Hayward says, “spiders are their own architects, creating resonating places that are home and territory” (229). This might provide a broader understanding of Molina’s transness, by assimilating one Greek legend with another, accepting the Oedipal crisis that might have ensnared the subject, but equally drawing on Hayward’s evocation of “*Arachne, the weaver ... A spinner of heavenly bestiality, Arachne melds species boundaries, but also transgresses nature and culture through a technological out-doing of the sacred. Arachne is a spiderwoman, but also a trans-woman*” (232).

Hayward’s parallel between trans woman and spider, and between identity and environment, offers a potentially intriguing way of seeing Molina’s female identity. The question is whether these isolated moments are sufficient to make Molina a character evocative of the standard trans definitions the film appears at times to be trying to connect with (Henry, 2017; Stryker, 2008), or whether the attempt feels tokenistic, particularly given the absence of such sentiments of regret about their body elsewhere in

the story. For as in the novel, the Molina of the film does not claim with any consistency an aspiration to become, or transition to, the psychosomatic state of femaleness. They claim instead to already occupy this position because of their sexuality.

To some extent, therefore, the accumulation of signifiers in the film via dialogue, dress, and props – absent in the novel – consolidates a degree of identification with female identity. Yet for Hayward too, the impact of the environment for the transgender spider-woman also requires somatic significations. The transitioning trans female body is “a material force ... in some way a bodily engagement with the world” (226, 235), as well as a form of “trans-becoming” (299). Of that engagement, Hayward notes how, “A neighbourhood is a bumptious *coherence* of bodies, ecosystems, communities, buildings, and sensations ... By trans-becoming, I mean an emergence of a material, psychological, sensual, and social self through corporeal, spatial, and temporal processes that trans-form the lived body” (225-226). Hayward’s recording via diary of her own transitioning as a transsexual woman blurs and merges the boundaries of bodily interface with environment, the one affecting the other in processes fomented by degrees with the hormones she is taking:

“Public Transit – I am pushed through concrete veins and steal arteries, along funiculars and elevators. In the hurl of conveyance, I hold my body in positions that signify my desire to ‘pass.’ But less obviously, estrogens have begun to refigure my olfactory nerves” (240).

In other words, the environment can provide important transgender signifiers, but without psychological and somatic significations, it is not enough to be a convincing source of signification, like a web without a spider.

Overall, an important effect of the film adaptation is the retreat from gender ambiguity, and the connected possibility that Molina is transgender. Instead, the depiction of Molina in the film reveals them to be a homosexual man who identifies affectionately with women and with female identity. This is partly evident in the labelling by others that goes uncontested by Molina, for example Valentin's address – in the movie only – “You gays never face facts” (18.20), as well as the occasional self-reference Molina uses of “faggot.” This more explicit indication of Molina being homosexual undoubtedly simplifies the film. Arguably it removes the social complexities of Hurt's Molina attempting to present as female in public spaces, including within the prison cell where Hurt's Molina is physically bigger and better-built than Raul Julia's Valentin – a physical dynamic that arguably undermines the male-female portrayal the novel in particular appears to attempt between Valentin and Molina. All the anxieties experienced by a trans woman presenting as female, and the potential danger attracted by the character, as recorded by Lili Elbe, Laura Jane Grace, Lohana Berkins, or any number of trans writers, is avoided. The cinematic representation, of course, is the choice taken by the director and screenwriter. Molina could have been depicted as transgender in the film, but their post-prison story in particular would have been different. That is, perhaps, a cinematic adaptation of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* still waiting to be made.

The resolution for Molina in both the novel and film, regardless, is not to live as a woman, and this underscores how in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, Molina is less a transgender woman than an opposite to Valentin. As film critic Norman Lavers says, “In the beginning, they had partial positions. Molina all beauty and pleasure of the moment, Valentin all discipline and the future. Now each has accepted enough from the other. That

they're finally complete" (26.58). Seen from this perspective, Molina was never intended to be a plausible transgender figure but one who draws on transgender tropes in a neat elegiac structure of beginning-middle-end, from being devoted to their mother to breaking free of this commitment, and in turn, from being "so easy to scare, so wishy-washy" (203) to confronting the possibility of independence and death. The film in particular emphasises this moment of a 'male' castration in which the son finally leaves the mother to help the revolution, in this case Molina kissing their mother while she sleeps, and gently murmuring to her, "It's time for me to take care of my own life" (103.10). The scene is redolent of the moment of Freudian castration for the son; as Mitchell says, "In both sexes, castration is the signal to give up the mother" (111). This narrative of the incomplete man fulfilling their destiny by embracing their completion is not unique to *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. As referred to previously, such stories were written by Plato, though in the twenty-first century, the film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001) utilizes this narrative. Jory Jones describes its problematic reputation as a film about a transgender character, noting how, "*Hedwig* has been consistently referred to as a transgender film. This well may be if the broadest definition of transgender is used, one in which drag, male femininity, cross-gender role-play, psychic bisexuality, e.t.c. are all included. Easily included within that definition would be *Hedwig* as a gay male rite of passage narrative, one that uses the figure of the transsexual to represent the path not taken – because it is the wrong path" (465).

Arguably, this is also Molina's lesson in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, to renounce the wrong path – namely the desiring of a permanently subordinate role within a sexual relationship with a heterosexual man. The film especially presents Molina as being

exploited by a heterosexual man, a waiter called Gabriel. At the end, and as part of his arc of completion, Molina ignores him (94.30). In the novel too, towards the story's conclusion, Valentin attempts to persuade Molina to abandon the notion of their subordination:

“I mean that if you enjoy being a woman ... you shouldn't feel any the less because of it ... I just mean that you don't have to make up for it with anything, with favors, or excuses. You don't have to ... submit” (243).

Valentin's hope, it appears, is that Molina can become a more rounded, self-reliant character, embracing both active and passive roles in relationships to encompass implicitly both maleness and femaleness. Highlighting the mode of a unification narrative in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, Jones describes how the personal resolution of the character Hansel and his trans alter-ego, artist Hedwig, concludes when “The reunion is complete; the return of Hedwig as an artist coincides with the return and redemption of Hansel as a man. The trans bodies of the characters disappear, returning to the ‘natural’ sexes of the actors. The tropes dissolve” (464, 463). For Jones, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is, arguably like *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, less a film with a trans character than one that exploits associated tropes, to allow the coming together of the masculine and feminine in a single person. One particular song in *Hedwig* underlines this theme of re-discovered unity through sexual love (17.36):

“Last time I saw you
We just split in two
You was looking at me
I was looking at you ...

We wrapped our arms around each other
Trying to shove ourselves back together”

Jones highlights this theme and the appropriation of trans identity, partially utilized and then discarded: “Transsexuality in *Hedwig* is used as a device for the author to confront the horror and fascination of phallic lack, to visit both sides of the received binary gender divide, and to emerge psychically transformed yet physically intact” (2006: 450). By the end of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, Molina has also transformed, not as a transgender woman, but as Valentin’s courageous companion, simultaneously homosexual and a politically active part of the resistance. Following love-making between Valentin and Molina, Molina in fact expresses a sense of unity and completion similar to the one expressed in *Hedwig* (235-236):

Molina: And it’s like when I’m alone here in my bed I’m no longer you either,
I’m someone else, who’s neither a man nor a woman, but someone who feels ...

Valentin: ... out of danger.

Molina: Yes, that’s exactly it, how did you know?

Valentin: Because it’s what I feel.

Challenging the Chauvinism of a Cisgender Gaze: Valentin, Misogyny, and the echoes of Slavoj Žižek’s Eurocentric and cisheteropatriarchal conception of revolution

Molina's ending, incorporating Valentin's cause into his own, underscores how both the book and film version of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* share at their core a binary sokratic relationship between Molina and Valentin. This relationship draws on the Freudian theme of the Oedipal complex, which is explicitly prevalent in the novel and establishes the respective characters at the outset of their development: Valentin fears male castration while Molina exhibits its effects. In fact, Molina's heteronormativity – or perhaps, their homonormativity – emanates partly from this dynamic. In terms of Molina's arc, however, from apparent self-indulgence and escapism to their involvement and death in a revolutionary struggle, another Freudian-Lacanian concept at work is the binary of Pleasure Principle and a combination of Reality Principle and Death Drive. These latter concepts are exemplified in the virtues Valentin appears to admire. The Reality Principle's characteristic of deferred gratification reflects maturity of the subject, as Sigmund Freud says, focusing no longer only on "what was agreeable, but what was real, even if it happened to be disagreeable" (1958: 219). More dramatic in its effects is the concept of the Death Drive, particularly if we use Lacan's definition, where "every drive is an attempt to go beyond the pleasure principle, to the realm of excess *jouissance* where enjoyment is experienced as suffering" (Evans, 1996: 33). An acceptance of the need to suffer, in the film particularly, is explicitly a part of Valentin's identity with the torture he endures for his cause even at the end (109.00). Lee Edelman describes the Death Drive as "a movement beyond the pleasure principle, beyond the distinctions of pleasure and pain, a violent passage beyond the bounds of identity, meaning, and law" (2004: 25). Arguably, it is this conception of the Death Drive and the Pleasure Principle,

more than any other influence, which shapes the resolution for each of the two main characters.

Valentin's arc of enlightenment is in one sense opposite to Molina's, from being solely about the Death Drive to an equal appreciation of the Pleasure Principle. It is particularly evident in his changing attitude to femininity and women. Valentin's initial disrespect towards femininity climaxes in his aggressive resistance to Molina, whose attempts to indulge him with food and drink are interpreted by Valentin as a corruption of his Spartan-like asceticism (193). Yet following his own reflection on the incident, Valentin begins to question his unwillingness to accept generosity and affection from others, and the indulging of pleasure that can accompany the exchange. In opening himself up to greater vulnerability and the sharing of acts of generosity, Valentin also develops a new sense of calm and of a safe space in Molina's company, as well as an appreciation of the Other (235).

The development of Valentin's appreciation of the queer Other is especially significant for its contrast with certain real-world discourses, where queerness is dismissed as part of the distracting influence of 'identity politics' and 'political correctness.' Exemplifying this dismissal is the position of Slavoj Žižek's (1999), whose rhetoric is often evocative of Valentin. This stems partly from Žižek's belief in the primacy of cisheteropatriarchy as constructed in the Oedipal crises – what Žižek calls the Master Signifier. To depart from this Master Signifier, for Žižek, is both a characteristic of postmodernity and also damaging both to the subject and society, rendering the individual “completely isolated from your surroundings, you are left with nothing whatsoever, with a void of idiocy pure and simple” (1999: 458). Žižek is particularly

critical of transgender identity and its apparently explicit rejection of the Oedipal structuring of subjectivity. Drawing on Alain Badiou, Žižek highlights “the notion of ‘atonal’ worlds ... which lack the intervention of a Master-Signifier to impose meaningful order onto the confused multiplicity of reality” (2008: 29). Trans identity, according to this position, undermines the meaningful order established by the Oedipal-structured gender binary and its function as “Master-Signifier.” As a parallel, Žižek compares trans identity to group masturbation – a “masturbathon” – which he contrasts in turn with a more meaningful heteronormativity and love. He claims, “one should insist on a focus on love, not mere enjoyment: it is love, the encounter of the Two, which ‘transubstantiates’ idiotic masturbatory enjoyment into an event proper ... The masturbathon is the ideal form of sex activity of this transgendered subject” (27-28). Binaries emerge here which are recognisable from *Kiss of the Spider Woman* with Molina’s self-indulgence and narcissism contrasted with Valentin’s virtues of self-sacrifice and solidarity.

One visible connection between Žižek’s position on modern trans and queer identity, as symptoms of the fragmentation and the isolation of the subject, is the reliance on popular culture. Žižek says, for example, that, “Withdrawal into privacy today means adopting formulas of private authenticity propagated by the recent culture industry – from taking lessons in spiritual enlightenment, and following the latest cultural and other fashions, to engaging in jogging and body-building” (2012: 107-108). The focus on cultural fashions can be extended to Molina’s passion for cinema, which appears to serve a function beyond mere entertainment. As Molina tells Valentin on different occasions, “Why break the illusion for me, and for yourself too? ... let me escape from reality once

in a while, because why should I let myself get more depressed than I am?” (1991: 17, 78). Immersion in cinema is Molina’s primary way of accommodating their self-repression in a heteronormative reality, which might otherwise lead to their depression. Valentin in turn criticizes Molina for the potential danger of such a dependence on fantasy, “It can become a vice, always trying to escape from reality, like that, it’s like taking drugs or something” (78). A consistent theme is the framing of Valentin’s desire to engage with reality and the greater society, and Molina’s perceived lack of such defiance and fortitude as they instead entertain Valentin with their re-telling of particular films.

Molina’s need to withdraw into fantasy appears a *fait accompli* to their cynicism towards politics and real-world change. It is here perhaps most explicitly that ‘early’ Valentin appears to mirror the ethics of Žižek. As Molina says about becoming a part of Valentin’s political cause, “Get into what group? I tell you I don’t understand any of those things, and I don’t believe in them very much either” (216). A central criticism by Žižek of the concepts of “minorities” and “marginal identities” (1999: 261-2), as well as political correctness (‘PC’), is the tendency to restrict individual attention to a solipsistic self-interest at the cost of solidarity, thereby allowing social inequality to continue. He says, for example, “So we are fighting our PC battles for the rights of ethnic minorities, of gays and lesbians, of different lifestyles, and so forth, while capitalism pursues its triumphant march” (261). In turn, for Žižek those characterised as aforementioned, disempowered minorities harbour cynicism or indifference towards collective causes:

“the postmodern disdain for great ideological Causes – to the notion that, in our postideological era, instead of trying to change the world, we should reinvent

ourselves, our whole universe, by engaging ourselves in new forms of (sexual, spiritual, aesthetic ...) subjective practices” (1999: 107).

Similar to Žižek, the character of Valentin early on in the story appears to value the idea of struggle and collective sacrifice over lifestyle:

“There’s no way I can live for the moment, because my life is dedicated to political struggle, or, you know, political action, let’s call it ... Anyway, I put up with all of it ... because there’s a purpose behind it. Social revolution, that’s what’s important, and gratifying the senses is only secondary. While the struggle goes on, and it’ll probably go on for the rest of my life, it’s not right for me to cultivate any kind of sensual gratification, do you get my point? because, really, that takes second place for me. The great pleasure’s something else, it’s knowing I’ve put myself in the service of what’s truly noble, I mean ... well ... a certain ideology” (1991: 19; 27).

With Valentin’s reflection, we are back to the Death Drive. The self-renunciation of “sensual gratification” in turn epitomizes the virtues held by Žižek. As Žižek similarly says,

“What makes life ‘worth living’ is the very excess of life: the awareness that there is something for which one is ready to risk one’s life (we may call this excess ‘freedom’, ‘honour’, ‘dignity’, ‘autonomy’, etc). Only when we are ready to take this risk are we really alive” (1999: 113).

The risk of feeling “really alive” for Žižek as for Valentin initially is related to the mutually unspecified socialist cause that both claim to pursue. Any other cause by

disempowered people is met by Žižek with brief, tokenistic praise: “Of course, one should fully acknowledge the tremendous liberating impact of the postmodern politicization of domains which were hitherto considered apolitical (feminism, gay and lesbian politics, ecology, ethnic and other so-called minority issues)” (433). Yet in other works, the more elaborated refrain about transgender identity, for example, is its similarity to masturbation and associations with sterility and cultural suicide. Like the ‘early’ Valentin of the first half of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, Žižek’s political ideology appears to venerate a spirit of the Death Drive and a disregard for the Pleasure Principle – at least as it refers to pleasures and desires not apparently shared by Žižek.

Yet like Valentin at the beginning, Žižek’s disregard for expressions of desire and culture as expressions of ‘lifestyle’ appears to underestimate their benefit when repression is the alternative. In fact, ‘early’ Valentin, as the Žižekian figure, increasingly betrays bitter and repressed experiences. These are partly connected to intimate relationships as well as ingrained prejudices that are difficult to imagine being solely solved by the political revolution he strives for – especially as this revolution is articulated in so little detail. Valentin’s prejudices, for example, include a cisheteropatriarchal veneration of the masculine over the feminine as seen in the beginning of the novel when he ridicules the ‘castrated’ hero in a film described by Molina. This suggests the revolution he struggles for would not necessarily emancipate disempowered identities. Valentin uses his own heteronormative experience as the default setting of what constitutes normality, and solutions are accordingly tied to this normality. In her critique of claims of neutrality by those speaking from the vantage point

of hegemonic authority – like heteronormative Valentin in this story – Maria Lugones says:

“you do not see me because you do not see yourself and you do not see yourself because you declare yourself outside of culture ... But declaring yourself outside of culture is self-deceiving. The deception hides your seeing only through the eyes of your culture ... that privileges the dominant culture as the only culture to ‘see with’ and conceives this seeing as to be done non-self-consciously” (2003: 46).

Valentin similarly imagines a general humanity intrinsically connected to his own experience and prejudices, including misogyny, as represented in a dialogue in the novel and film (20.40):

Valentin: Don’t act like that. You sound just like a-

Molina: Like a what? Say it. Say it, like a woman, you mean?

The implication in this exchange is Valentin’s binary association of men/masculinity with action, and women/femininity with inaction/distraction/passivity. Later in an internalized stream of consciousness, Valentin reveals further prejudices of his mentality as an evidently white European in a colonized country: “a fellow who can see that she’s pregnant, a fellow who doesn’t want to have an Indian for a child, a fellow who doesn’t want to mix his blood with the blood of an Indian” (1991: 146). The suggestion is a gap between Valentin’s conscious awareness of what constitutes virtue, and the unconscious prejudices that, unspoken, threaten to undermine it. By implication, it seems that Valentin’s utilitarian motives are less benevolent and inclusive than he realizes. He

assumes that the conditions of a white, cisheteropatriarchal male can be generalized as representative of those who fall outside his own identity. The footnotes added in the novel, about the Bolshevik revolution post-1917, underline the narrative's questioning of Valentin's assumptions:

“in spite of Lenin's concern for sexual liberation in the USSR, his rejection of anti-homosexual legislation for example, such legislation was reintroduced in 1934 by Stalin, and as a result, the prejudice against homosexuality – as a type of ‘bourgeois degeneration’ – held fast in a number of Communist parties of the world” (169).

The narrative appears to suggest, both with this footnote and through the evolution of Valentin's character, that without appreciating the narrow starting point of these concepts when identified by white, heteronormative men, their value and impact may be limited in terms of the people it attempts to liberate. In the case of both Valentin and Žižek, this implicit erasure of the legitimacy of minority identities leaves in place an uneven form of patriarchal, masculine tyranny that portrays itself as a universal, Master Signifier. Where *Kiss of the Spider Woman* departs from the position held by Žižek is Valentin's transformation, enforced by his incarceration and sharing of a cell with the queer Molina. Gradually, Valentin's engagement with Molina creates a process of demystification for both of them, and an opening up to new experiences and a greater appreciation of difference.

Conclusion

This essay began with a question about Molina being transgender. One answer is that Molina exhibits transness in partial, symbolic terms but is not trans. This need hardly discount Molina's status, if we accept Jacqueline Rose's analysis on the impossibility of satisfying any gender identity fully, for if "there is no continuity of psychic life, so there is no stability of sexual identity, no position for women (or for men) which is ever simply achieved" (1986: 90-91). Yet Molina never quite escapes their fictional persona; the unevenness of their identification with women appears too divorced from certain aspects of the gender matrix, specifically the importance of appearance and visual/aural signification. Molina ultimately fails to evoke the kind of complexity evident in real-life transgender narratives as well as literary imaginings such as Hall's portrayals of inversion in *The Well of Loneliness* and *Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself*, or in literary realist fiction by trans writers such as Jamie Berrout. As the narratives of real-life trans women attest, in particular, the suffering experienced because of visibility and dissonance is too visceral and devastating for it to be lightly cast aside as not important. At any rate, it becomes an issue in the film where the visual/aural dynamic cannot simply be ignored, and where Molina is depicted more explicitly as a homosexual man. To the credit of the makers of the film, in fact, we see the acknowledgment that it takes more than a cisgender man with a few props to convincingly portray transgender experience. In the words of Lohana Berkins,

"To be transgender is to have the very intimate and profound sense of living in a gender that is different from that which society assigned to their genitals. This

isn't about clothes or makeup or the surgeries ... it's about ways of feeling, of thinking, of relating with and seeing things" (1995).

As for Molina's sokratic companion, it is a quirk of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* that Valentin can be read as a more convincingly three-dimensional character than the public persona of the cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek, with whom he appears to share so many perspectives at the story's beginning. Perhaps, indeed, were Žižek to share a cell with a transgender woman, he too might gradually dismiss as simplistic his own veneration of cisheteropatriarchal identity contrasted against a subordinate, damaging queer/trans Other. For Valentin does appreciate by the end how a revolution that dismisses particular identities as unimportant by definition also excludes and implicitly condemns them. Valentin can in turn be a model for those who wish to transform society by inclusion, and by appreciating the function of pleasure beyond their own. It could be argued that *Kiss of the Spider Woman*'s most significant insight on trans identity is how any revolution looking to improve conditions for people, and which fails to appreciate its minorities, is hardly worthy of the name.

Chapter 2

When the Cisgender Gaze Gets to Define a Trans Female Body for a Cisgender Society: David Ebershoff's novel *The Danish Girl*

Background: a brief summary of the historical Lili Elbe

In 2000, David Ebershoff published his debut novel *The Danish Girl*, based on the life of the Danish trans woman Lili Elbe (official name Lili Elvenes). Approximately two years after the publication of Ebershoff's novel, script-writer Lucinda Coxon completed her adaptation of the novel into a film script, and by 2015, director Tom Hooper had used Coxon's script and released his movie version.

The timing of the movie especially is resonant of the increasing acceptability of a particular mode of trans identity in the mainstream in the twenty-first century. The film's high profile, including Oscar nominations, underscores especially the film's cultural importance in the Anglophone Global North by informing mainstream audiences of trans female identity. Exemplifying this cultural influence are the consequences for the writers and producers of the respective versions. Ebershoff is awarded the position of one of a "group of visionary leaders" at Lambda Literary, his role to provide guidance to writers depicting trans lives (Lambdaliterary.org). The scriptwriter Coxon meanwhile reveals in one online interview her own acquired platform, in response to the question about what

‘*The Danish Girl* can do to help in people’s perception of transgender issues and helping to push them forward.’ Coxon responds:

“I’m sitting in Washington D.C., if you could see outside of the window, the White House is just behind me. I’m here because we were in the White House yesterday with this film we were asked to screen it here. President Obama is the first President ever to use the word ‘transgender’ and has been a great supporter of the LGBT+ community. And we were here as part of a ‘Champions of Change’ event” (2015: 15.00).

Coxon by this insight, like Ebershoff, has evidently become a cisgender representative and influencer for trans people at the highest, most prestigious levels of U.S. society.

Without being trans themselves, and without any apparent background in trans scholarship or in trans activism and/or community work, they reveal the way narratives about trans women continue to be removed from trans women themselves. Meanwhile, less informed cisgender figures who already enjoy privileged positions in the arts are able to benefit from the success of their cisgender-friendly representation to enjoy an additional status as experts on, and spokespeople for, trans identity at the highest levels of society.

At this juncture, it is important to note the unstable connection of the novel and adapted script to the historical source upon which the work of Ebershoff and Coxon are based. Their respective texts draw upon Elbe’s posthumously published biographical translation *Man Into Woman* (1933), which can currently be regarded as the most celebrated early trans-authored text in the Anglophone Global North. Yet as Pamela Caughie and Sabine Meyer highlight, the biography varies across its different translated

versions, from its publication in 1931 in Danish, then to German in 1932, and finally in English in the U.K. and the U.S.A. in 1933. This variation includes in relation to the depiction of gender identity in terms of “narrative elements, pronoun choices, and paratextual materials” (2020: 17). Caughie and Meyer also note that “the story presented here has been produced by multiple agents and told in differing versions so that it cannot be taken at face value as the story of Lili Elvenes’ life” (18). These multiple agents include the editor Ernst Ludwig Harthern (working under the alias of Niels Hoyer) authoring in tandem with Elbe (20). Harthern himself worked from “multiple sources,” but the contribution of Elbe’s former wife Gerda Wegener is also ambiguous. According to Caughie and Meyer, Gerda Wegener,

“understood herself to be a co-author and had apparently repeatedly accused Harthern of having stolen the book from her, his recognition of her involvement was limited to her contributions in an early draft of the manuscript. Harthern only saw himself and ‘Lili Elbe’ in an authorial position” (32).

A fourth figure, the journalist Loulou Lassen, is also cited as claiming shared authorship (35), while medical information is drawn from the practitioner Kurt Warnekros, whose medical insight contrasts significantly against Elbe’s original medical authority Magnus Hirschfeld. Warnekros for example appears to be promoting a narrative of Elbe as a “pseudo-hermaphrodite” that legitimizes Elbe in being able to obtain identification papers, a clear clash of interests in the supposed integrity of his medical testimony (9). Warnekros’s position is undermined by the original examinations supervised by Hirschfeld, who according to Caughie and Meyer’s research states that “‘Lily Elbe’ exhibited no traces of ‘physical hermaphroditism, not even pronounced androgyny’” (8).

The broader social pressure of the authorship to sell Lili's story to the public, including its medical claims, are summed up by Caughie and Meyer who state "such an account [w]as a way of presenting a story that was comprehensible to the public at the time" (45).

An initial mass market for *Man Into Woman*, it is worth remembering here, is 1930s Germany where Lili and her medical treatment are based. As Sølve M. Holm says,

"While during the 1920s, there was a strong discourse of sexual liberation internationally with sexual minority groups arguing for social acceptance and legal rights, around 1930, another public and political discourse had become dominant which stressed that homosexuality, prostitution, and general sexual promiscuity were a threat to societal order and the sexual health of the population" (2020: 241).

Holm's observation connects to a question asked by Trans scholar Sandy Stone in her influential analysis of *Man Into Woman*, namely, "For whom was Lili Elbe constructed? Under whose gaze did her text fall? And consequently what stories appear and disappear in this kind of seduction?" (2006: 224). Stone identifies the tone and description of female identity in *Man Into Woman* and subsequent twentieth-century trans memoirs and autobiographies "as male fetish, as replicating a socially enforced role, or as constituted by performative gender." The very sharp, binary shift in Lili's transition in *Man Into Woman* is particularly implausible. As Stone says of protagonists like Elbe via twentieth-century trans female biographies generally, "They go from being unambiguous men, albeit unhappy men, to unambiguous women. There is no territory between" (225). In *Man Into Woman*, this includes Lili waking up from her initial testicular surgery with her voice and handwriting having changed to a woman's (2004: 125, 128), some of the post-

surgery effects recorded in *Man Into Woman* that we know today can only be fictional in spite of the text's claims of medical veracity. Yet paradoxically, *Man Into Woman* also belies later interpretations by Ebershoff and Coxon on the fluid shift in Elbe's life from male to female domains to accompany the transition. In *Man Into Woman*, Elbe's desire is to reject all traces of her former male life, we are told "Everything that related to Andreas [Einar's pseudonym in the text] is detested by her, but especially painting" (158). Yet she is ultimately forced by necessity to return to her previous vocation by working as an art teacher (246). Such clashes of unwelcome realities with the desire for an instant transition in fact recur in different ways in *Man Into Woman*, from Lili's money problems (35, 240) to the awkward exchanges with family members such as her sister (219-221). These challenges are ignored by Ebershoff and Coxon, where Lili shifts effortlessly to working at the perfume counter of a department store as one of a team of sales girls, her trans identity apparently never suspected, while also never having discernible money problems or any family members to contend with.

Exemplifying the complexity of real life intervening on transitioning is Lili's persona. In *Man Into Woman*, there is sufficient evidence of a headstrong figure determined to transition, albeit via the occasional depiction of two internalized identities fighting like Jekyll and Hyde over her identity (24). In *Man Into Woman*, Elbe at times is depicted in problematic terms with a caricatured femininity including lachrymosity and a new psychosomatic fragility, as described by Gerda after one surgery, "this sweet new Lili, lay in my arms like ... a little sister, weeping many, many tears" (130). Yet other times she is also mirthfully boastful of her femininity (187), defiant as a representation of other trans women (250-260), as well as depressed at not being able to pass as a

cisgender woman (158). Sexually, Lili maintains a strict heteronormative narrative, switching from her pre-transition preference for women and revulsion at homosexuality (109) to an abrupt desire only for men (80-89). Addressing this awkwardness, Tobias Raun highlights an alternative narrative captured in the paintings of Lili Elbe by the wife Gerda. As Raun says,

“*The Danish Girl* [is] where Lili becomes a shy and submissive woman with a fragile self. Both of these representations divert from the painted portraits of Lili by Gerda that show a much more self-confident and even at times decadent Lili. Lili is here portrayed in line with the chicness of the Modern Woman of the 1920s with hair cut short into a bob, short dresses, and make-up, occasionally smoking a cigarette and playing cards. Lili appears self-assured about her attraction as a female visual object and image ... the paintings, unlike *Man Into Woman* and *The Danish Girl*, do not foreclose the possibility of same-sex attraction, and even strongly suggest an undertone of sexual engagement” (2020: 262-263).

This alternative Lili depicted in Gerda’s paintings is, as Raun says, absent from the portrayals by Ebershoff and Coxon. It reminds us of the selected nature of the representation of Lili shaped by particular social norms during the time and place of the representation. Raun’s analysis serves as a warning that any attempt to discover the essence of Lili Elbe in the original source material of her autobiography is likely to be compromised given both the social constraints that shaped the original text and the uncertain, multiple authorship. Of the former, Raun says, “*Man Into Woman* can be seen as a strategic attempt to medically legitimate Lili’s situation with and through the narrative tropes available at the time while also trying to avoid obscenity charges” (259).

With this perspective, Stone's series of questions is as prescient to the twenty-first century texts that constitute the novel and film *The Danish Girl* as to *Man Into Woman*, "For whom was Lili Elbe constructed? Under whose gaze did her text fall? And consequently what stories appear and disappear in this kind of seduction?" In evaluating the text that launched the mainstream phenomenon in the Anglophone Global North, known as *The Danish Girl*, namely Ebershoff's novel, Stone's questions are no less relevant to Ebershoff's authorship as to the multiple authors of the original autobiography.

***The Danish Girl* (2000): the story of how cisgender appropriation, class privilege, and whiteness, contribute to the shaping of transgender identity in the twenty-first century U.S.A.**

"the white rip-off writer gets published and gets rich off of marginalized people"

Gloria Anzaldúa, 2009: 194

In his justification for his portrayal of Lili Elbe, including dual-personality and unreal traits of intersex, David Ebershoff acknowledges its difference to contemporary representations of trans identity. Ebershoff asserts about Lili Elbe, "She was very specific about how she thought of her past when she lived as a man: she spoke of Einar as another soul. This probably does not reflect how many trans men and women today describe their own experiences, but it is how Lili described hers" (2000: 320). Ebershoff is correct to a degree, of course: at times *Man Into Woman* does invoke a dual-personality narrative,

although at other times it abandons this narrative strategy, or undermines it with alternative perspectives.

Arguably, Ebershoff's confidence in being the person to tell Lili's story is a key insight of his reflections, encapsulating the relationship between power, entitlement, and appropriation. He claims of Lili Elbe,

“I understand and welcome the impulse to lionise her and define her story within the context of our own understanding of what it means to be trans today; but *The Danish Girl* tries to bring the reader into her interior life, which is fundamentally different from trying to place her in history” (322).

It is worth interrogating his words: “I understand and welcome ... but ...” Whose intervention does he respectfully not welcome in regards to his representation? Who else, it would appear, than that of the contemporary transgender woman, empowered by the trans civil rights movement to refuse to accept tropes of hyper-femininity or delusion that characterize twentieth-century representations, and who expects new representations to align with these developments of greater nuance and sympathy. Yet Ebershoff warns against the attempt to “lionise” Lili. By the use of the word “lionise,” Ebershoff neutralizes a more sympathetic narrative as being of an agenda, in contrast with the implied neutrality of his perspective. “*The Danish Girl* tries to bring the reader into her interior life,” says Ebershoff, apparently viewing his representation as capturing the true voice of Lili Elbe. This is a remarkable assumption of objectivity for any writer, including one inhabiting a site of cisgender privilege. From a post-colonial perspective, Maria Lugones analyses the dynamics of such positioning, of an empowered identity claiming neutrality while writing about the disempowered. She says, “declaring yourself

outside of culture is self-deceiving. The deception hides your seeing only through the eyes of your culture” (2003: 46). While Lugones writes in relation to ethnocentrism, her position is relevant to the broader issue of Ebershoff’s *ciscentric* claim, of trying to represent Lili Elbe in his own re-telling of her voice. As Lugones says, “*it is one’s culture and one’s society that one is looking at.*” Accepting Lugones’s position on the dangers of cultural bias, it is important to highlight how Ebershoff’s re-telling of the Lili Elbe story is shaped by his accompanying intersections and understanding of transness and transitioning as a cisgender man. In this respect, Ebershoff becomes part of a tradition noted by Julia Serano, who highlights two particular texts of the same era that produce negative depictions of trans and intersex identity, respectively. Serano says,

“These writers took two of the most maligned and misunderstood sexual minorities in existence, hollowed them out, and poured in their own non-intersex, cissexual biases, inclinations, and impressions ... [which in turn] profoundly shapes and solidifies a naïve audience’s opinions about transsexuals and intersex people” (2016: 201).

On the danger of appropriation overall, Serano concludes, “For writers who have never had to deal with being transsexual or intersex to lay claim to those experiences, to use them for their own purposes, and to profit from them, is nothing short of exploitation” (201, 204). This section accordingly argues that Ebershoff’s *The Danish Girl* conforms to this pattern of exploitation, which reduces and aligns Lili Elbe’s complex autobiographical testimony to the tradition of the *Myra Breckenridge* series (2014) [1968; 1974] and *Gravity’s Rainbow*, (2013) [1973], as a cisgender castration fantasy.

A text constructed through the Male, Cisgender Gaze

In spite of Ebershoff's claim to "bring the reader into her interior life" (2000: 322), a consistent thematic focus of *The Danish Girl* is its emphasis on exteriority rather than interiority. Gone from the autobiography, for example, are the recurring expressions by Lili¹ fearing for her own mental health as she struggles to transition, with accompanying bouts of melancholy (2004: 94, 139, 159), recurring references to committing suicide (23, 159, 262) and expressions of desire to be cut off from society. Rather than highlight the recurring processes of Lili's self-censorship and accompanying anxieties, the questioning of Lili's sanity now comes almost exclusively from external medical practitioners, including the diagnosis of general insanity (2000: 115), homosexuality (168) and schizophrenia (171). This renders Lili as primarily viewed by the Male Gaze of institutional authority, and underscores the cinematic style of the narrative. As Laura Mulvey says of this central dynamic via the context of mainstream cinema, "woman as representation signifies castration, inducing voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent her threat" (1999: 843). The journey of Lili as depicted in the cinematic novel *The Danish Girl* conforms to this voyeuristic dynamic. We watch her as Einar, in the key opening scene, becoming seduced by the feel of women's clothing. In the novel, we also see the persistent encouragement by the wife Gerda² to embrace a

¹ This study of the novel *The Danish Girl* will refer to Lili Elbe according to her female name except when it is appropriate to distinguish the depiction of her prior male identity as 'Einar,' which itself goes by the pseudonym of 'Andreas' in the original *Man Into Woman*.

² Gerda Wegener, the wife of Einar/Lili, is re-named Greta in *The Danish Girl*. For the sake of consistency, this section will refer to her as Gerda.

figurative castration with a lifestyle as a domesticity-focused and patriarchal-configured heteronormative female figure. Then finally, via a doctor who encourages a mode of physical castration, we have Lili's death, and sexual redemption for the simultaneously encouraging and trapped wife Gerda.

Within this voyeuristic narrative, there is, unlike *Man Into Woman*, little focus on situational distress and anxiety from Lili, or simultaneously, the profound desire to transition and accompanying sense of agency. Typifying this shift from interior to exterior, and from transness to castration fantasy, are two potentially revealing scenes, one involving Lili's first time out in public presenting as a woman, the other, Lili's surgery. In *The Danish Girl* novel, the former is presented retrospectively in a casual, off-hand manner between Lili and Gerda via the distancing mechanism of the third-person (26):

“Was Lili here again?”

“The whole afternoon.”

“What did she do?”

“She went over to Fonnesbach's and bought herself a few things.”

“All alone?”

Einar nodded ... “She said to tell you she wants to go to the ball.”

By contrast to such casual representations of a potentially monumental, internally nerve-racking, and jarring clash between self and Other, and private and public spheres, is the visceral focus of the novel on physical castration. The graphic and elaborate description of Lili's pain is vastly more detailed than in *Man Into Woman*:

“For nearly six weeks she had lolled in and out of consciousness, vomiting in her sleep, haemorrhaging between her legs and in her abdomen ... Lili didn’t want to disturb Carlisle’s sleep, but she could barely remain silent. The pain was returning, and she was gripping the sash of the blanket, shredding it in fear. She concentrated on the bulb in the ceiling, biting her lip, but soon the pain had spread through her body, and she was screaming, begging for a morphia injection. She cried for ether. She whimpered for her pills laced with cocaine” (302-303).

Lili’s experience at the story’s climax is reduced to the visual, physical agony that accompanies surgery; transness, then, is depicted not in terms of internal experience but an externally visible, physical crisis. Undermining Lili’s agency too is the passive nature of her journey towards feminization/castration. Unlike *Man Into Woman* in which we are told, “She asks for one more operation, to become a mother” (2004: 258), the idea for the final, fatal operation in *The Danish Girl* is conceived by the doctor. Lili is described in the novel in conversation with a friend,

“She told him that Professor Bolk wanted her to return. He wanted to attempt a final metamorphosis ... Professor Bolk had promised he could do something else for Lili, something that would make her even more of a woman than she already was” (2000: 280).

Consistent with the greater dominance in the novel of Gerda forcefully encouraging Einar to ‘become’ Lili via constant cross-dressing, is the dominance of the doctor in cajoling and luring Einar/Lili towards a final act of fatal castration.

The thematic possibility that *The Danish Girl* convinces more as voyeuristic castration fantasy than a narrative about transness is further signified by the protagonist’s

relationship with the texture of women's clothing. In the novel's pivotal opening scene, the description of Einar/Lili modelling for their wife with women's clothing fixes a narrative gaze not on Einar/Lili's inner turmoil, such as it is in the autobiographical account of this scene, but instead on the seduction of the protagonist via encasement in women's underwear. The narrative voice describes the scene, "He imagined the wrinkled roll of the stocking gliding over the white bone of his ankle. Over the small cushion of his calf. Clicking into the hook of a garter. Einar had to shut his eyes" (4). The parallel here to transvestite 'erotica' has been highlighted by Rani Baker, who notes its "forced femme" scenario, "in which such a woman manipulates her unwilling and frequently protesting male partner into crossdressing" (2015). More broadly, Baker notes of the adapted screenplay of the novel which maintains this pivotal scene as being "not unlike other classic queer erotica; the feeling of loss of self-control, the internalized shame and reveling in bucking social stigma, themes of being lured away from 'normal' life into a hubris-laden decadent 'freedom' that always ends in punishment" (2015). The opening scene of the novel, describing the protagonist's first experience of cross-dressing, accordingly sets the tone for the narrative. In a series of descriptions in *The Danish Girl*, the story describes Einar/Lili's relation to the texture of the clothing which delights or fascinates the protagonist (2000: 6, 11, 27, 50, 85, 86, 123, 237). The use of the opening scene in *The Danish Girl*, with its emphasis on the tactile as Einar/Lili is asked to model for Gerda, is different to *Man Into Woman*, where the scene occurs much later in the text, and with far less dramatic significance. Similarly dressing upon request in women's clothing, the details of the appearance are largely absent and the scene itself feels less pivotal: "a few minutes later I was standing in the studio in costume and high-heeled

shoes. We both laughed as though it were a great joke” (2004: 65). The portrayal here is more light-hearted – and arguably, as a result, less dramatic and decisive – even as Einar realizes a pleasurable connection has been made. Reference to the touch of women’s clothing is made, but the lingering on details, including the reference to women’s underwear, is absent in *Man Into Woman*: “And I cannot deny, strange though it may sound, that I enjoyed myself in this disguise. I liked the feel of soft women’s clothing; indeed, I seemed to take them as a matter of course” (2004: 65-66).

Apart from the elaboration on the detail of texture and its effect on Einar/Lili, with the reference to closed eyes and the sexualized connotation of women’s underwear, is the subsequent reaction of shame. In *The Danish Girl* version, the dialogue includes an erotic frisson: “‘We’ll keep this our secret, Greta?’ Einar whispered. ‘You won’t tell anyone, will you?’ He was both frightened and excited” (6). It replicates less the focus of *Man Into Woman* and its own opening revelation by Lili-as-Einar of considering transition or suicide, than that of a cross-dressing fantasy, with the latter mixing of guilt with pleasure at a tactile experience bordering on fetish. Gerda, for example, like a matriarch in erotic transvestite fantasy, later persuades Einar against his will into continued feminizing, to the point where it consumes him. “I need to see Lili every day,” Gerda says, despite Einar/Lili’s resistance. “‘But Lili can’t come every day,’ Einar protested” (96), comes the reply. The tone of weary resistance, typifying Baker’s observation of the erotic trope of a “forced femme,” is unlike that in *Man Into Woman*, in which Einar/Lili appears consistently eager to engage in presenting as female. Increasingly in *Man Into Woman*, it is Lili herself who actively pursues opportunities to present as female, even by inference to the frequent Jekyll and Hyde theme that absolves

‘Einar’ of any impropriety. “And thus it came to pass,” Einar/Lili’s narration says in *Man Into Woman*, “that month after month Lili insisted with growing stubbornness on her rights, and gave place to me with increasing reluctance” (2004: 79).

The interpretation of male-to-female cross-dressing as a sado-masochistic experience is one we see in cisgender literature, perhaps most graphically in Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve*. The latter’s erotic imagining of a male becoming feminized and castrated is particularly resonant:

“The matriarchs, I surmised, had captured me ... I had no choice but to submit myself to her ... She dressed me ... she combed out my longish, yellow hair for me, tugging at the tangles while I did a manful best not to wince” (1977: 53, 55).

Ebershoff, unlike Carter, maintains a sexlessness to the proceedings, and Gerda’s requests are generally gentle rather than aggressive. Yet Lili’s gradual apparel-focused ‘transition’ align with tropes of erotic, heteronormative transvestite narrative. As similarly noted by Baker, Richard Ekins, citing Buhrich and McConaghy, says of related telephone sex scripts of transvestite pornography, “The innocent male is coerced into wearing female clothes. The change is ‘fantastically successful’ ... the protagonist decides to live permanently as a woman” (1996: 155). Describing here a typical ‘sado-masochistic’ plot in phone-based transvestite pornography, Ekins could equally be describing the plot of Ebershoff’s novel, where the protagonist’s desire and agency are adjusted to include a noticeable coercion and a breaking of the protagonist’s resistance by Gerda. In a further parallel is what Ekins calls “intimacy scripts,” in which the erotic cross-dressing fantasy involves “participation as an equal in a shared women’s world ... from which men are excluded” (156). In the case of *The Danish Girl*, Lili finds work at

the perfume counter in a department store serving female customers (2000: 267), the kind of smooth integration as ‘one of the girls’ that Lili does not achieve in *Man Into Woman* outside of the actual clinic. Instead, in *Man Into Woman*, Lili must return reluctantly to her former career in art, in a concession to her past and her enduring skill-set as an artist.

The act of smoothing Einar/Lili’s progress towards figurative and physical castration that characterizes *The Danish Girl* as an inexorable castration fantasy represents not only a distortion of the Lili Elbe of *Man Into Woman*, but also a structural problem with the novel’s appearance as a classical realist text. This is particularly in regards to verisimilitude and the unconvincing absence of narrative obstacles. Defined by Roland Barthes as ‘hermeneutics’ and by Peter Brooks as ‘detours’ (Cobley, 2014: 11-12), the lack of meaningful antagonism at an interpersonal level underlines the unconvincing and arguably unengaging ease of progress from male to female, with very little tension produced in between. In his review of Ebershoff’s novel, Richard Bernstein highlights both the binary-based isolation of Lili into two separate entities and the ease of switching from one to another without a sense of synthesis. He observes,

“But this game strangely limits Einar as a character, making him into something so automatic and unreflective as to strain psychological credibility ... Lili’s experience takes place in such a circumscribed world that it presents almost no practical complications for Greta” (Bernstein, 2000).

Focusing on the lack of interpersonal tension in the novel between Einar/Lili and those closest to them, another reviewer, John Burnham Schwartz, says,

“When it comes to Greta, however, Ebershoff seems less willing (or able) to do the hard imaginative work of illuminating the character behind the idea. There is a

smoothness, an insistent and finally evasive romanticism, to the way he depicts Greta in the novel ... Greta remains perilously close to the surface, and engenders in us the rather ungenerous feeling that, with this woman at least, the author has lost his nerve” (Schwartz, 2000).

The portrayal of Gerda, in fact, is arguably the element that most undermines *The Danish Girl*'s verisimilitude, and confirms its narrative theme as a castration fantasy. On the surface, the significance of Gerda's role has intensified, with Ebershoff having Americanized her as a native of Ebershoff's own home city of Pasadena, California. Ebershoff's Americanized Gerda is certainly a more prominent character than in *Man Into Woman*, with the effect of adding to the reduction of Lili's interiority, through Gerda's narrative gaze. Yet Gerda is simultaneously less credible in *The Danish Girl*, by being reduced to an idealized wife that conforms neatly to a role within erotic transvestite fantasy. Ebershoff's Gerda, for example, is happy to sacrifice her sexual needs and the company of the man she is married to for the pleasure of dressing Einar up as another person; simultaneously she becomes, without complaint, the only breadwinner (129) and the doer of housework (141). When Lili begins to pursue her own romantic needs with her future lover Henrik, Gerda is left alone at home, without complaint at her own lack of romantic attention (66). Despite the growing distance between them, Gerda encourages this development, by continuing to dress and praise Lili (74, 75, 78), insisting that Einar get dressed as Lili, against Einar's resistance (84, 96). Moreover, whereas in *Man Into Woman* Gerda falls in love with the character Feruzzi and becomes married to him during Lili's series of operations (243), in *The Danish Girl* Gerda refuses to abandon her commitment to Einar/Lili, maintaining a role of carer as Lili recovers from her operations

and begins to make a new life for herself in Copenhagen. Gerda's objective in terms of healthcare for her husband typifies her attitude before even the midpoint period in Paris: "Part of her hoped [Doctor] Hexler would instruct Einar to live freely as Lili, to take a job as a salesgirl behind the glass counter at Fønnesbech's department store" (112). When her husband's sanity is questioned by Doctor Hexler, Gerda automatically dismisses the doctor as ignorant (114). Her responses are thus always supportive, encouraging, even forceful, in spite of the consequence for the marriage. Unlike in *Man Into Woman*, it is Gerda, rather than the friend Anna, who both suggests Einar get dressed for the first time, and be named Lili (6, 13).

In being so accepting of Einar's transformation into Lili – indeed, by being so consistently active in encouraging it – Gerda's contribution helps to undermine the verisimilitude of the storytelling of a personal journey with few narrative "detours" or "forces of antagonism" (Yorke, 30). Connected to the lack of narrative coherence in this ostensibly classical realist text, the character dynamics ignore the impact of the Other as a socializing force, in which each subject carries a mindful awareness of the Other and is affected and influenced by it. As Catriona Mackenzie says, "our ability to imagine ourselves otherwise ... plays an important role in practical reflection and deliberation about the self, and hence in self-definition" (2005: 290). Within this process of reflection and reaction, Mackenzie observes the binding of self-worth to social dynamics and the likelihood of tensions in the negotiation of identity, "Agents live their lives in a number of overlapping but distinct social spheres, including the spheres of intimate interpersonal relationships ... These different spheres bring out different, sometimes conflicting, aspects of agents' identities and reinforce or undermine these aspects." As with

pornography, or arguably any other one-dimensional form of adult fantasy, in *The Danish Girl*, the Other at a meaningful level is absent, with the wife-figure too amenable to convince as a separate individual, as if constructed according to a fantasist's specifications. For this reason too, and devoid of interpersonal tension, *The Danish Girl* is closer to castration fantasy, set up to accommodate the erotic cross-dressing fantasy of a transvestite protagonist, and their inexorable pull towards figurative and physical castration. This appears to be confirmed by the portrayal of those characters closest to Einar/Lili: Gerda, childhood friend Hans, and Gerda's brother Carlisle, namely those whose resistance would be most difficult for Einar/Lili to ignore. There are no awkward meetings with the sister in *The Danish Girl* – Ebershoff has removed her from the story. With this, an important connection with Einar/Lili's past is gone, and so too a dissenting voice against the transition. To return to Bernstein's review of the novel: "Lili's experience takes place in such a circumscribed world that it presents almost no practical complications for Greta." To underline Bernstein's observation more generally, it is worth noting how after Lili's final operation, we learn through correspondence that Lili's brother-in-law Carlisle will stay several additional weeks at the Clinic to look after Lili (299). Where, one wonders, do these friends find the time? Or indeed the money, for whereas *Man Into Woman* records Einar's financial worries and anxious requests to borrow money (35, 240), in *The Danish Girl* Einar never discusses the financial implications of transition and the abandoning of a career. Only those of substantial financial privilege – certainly not the Lili and Gerda of *Man Into Woman* – could experience transitioning like this over so many years in some of Europe's most beautiful and prestigious cities without any mention of recurring financial difficulties.

The generally anodyne reality of *The Danish Girl* is present elsewhere, also with the effect of cancelling out the potentially antagonistic presence of the Other, again with damaging implications for the story's verisimilitude. In a scene apparently added by Ebershoff, Lili is described at a women-only swimming baths in Paris, attracting looks of intrigue and admiration from the other female swimmers (123-124). In bars and theatres, she is consistently the most admired female, attracting looks from men (99, 135). Her childhood friend Hans, meanwhile, simply accepts her story of being Einar's "beautiful" cousin (88, 135-136), spending time with her without realizing her former identity until towards the end (210). Passing as female is not an issue for Lili in *The Danish Girl* as it is in *Man Into Woman*, where scenes or suggestions of Lili's attractiveness to men (2004: 29, 67, 89) are counterbalanced with contradictory bouts of anxiety about her ability to pass (158, 178, 214, 262). In *The Danish Girl*, only one such description of tension appears, when Lili informs her lover Henrik of her transgender identity, and in a response consistent with all those characters close to Lili, Henrik affirms his immediate, impassive support: "I'm not surprised" (279).

Contributing to this narrative of effortless integration among understanding companions and desiring men, and into an unresisting, utterly accepting female world is the erasure of Lili's past as a source of turmoil, suggesting that alongside – and aligned to – the castration fantasy, is a view of the transgender woman as an exotic outcast. Characters that tie Lili to family and childhood, such as her sister and brother, are removed by Ebershoff, despite her brother's significance in *Man Into Woman* as the sole acquaintance at her deathbed (270). No reference is made to her mother: Lili's final poignant words to her sister at the end of *Man Into Woman*, about seeing her parents in

heaven, with the mother embracing Lili as her daughter, have been removed (270). In his Author's Note, Ebershoff discusses the role of memory in *Man Into Woman* in a way that assumes Lili's pronouncements of amnesia define her: "Lili spoke of her past as if it were another's, as if Einar's memories were not her own" (2000: 316). The novel adopts this selectively essentializing position and pursues it by omitting sections and characters that alter Lili into a figure without a past. The result is that the portrayal of Lili that Ebershoff creates conforms to notions of the transgender woman in the latter decades of the twentieth-century as dehumanized, cut-off, a loner removed from reality, publicly presenting a life without a past. This type of effect is addressed in a critique by bell hooks of the documentary about Ball culture among socio-economically disadvantaged people of colour, *Paris Is Burning* (1990), and the problematic role of the director and filmmaker in the representation:

"Much of the individual testimony makes it appear that the characters are estranged from any community beyond themselves. Families, friends, etc., are not shown, which adds to the representation ... as cut off, living on the edge ... And yet who determines this? Is this the way the black men view their reality or is this the reality Livingston constructs? Certainly the degree to which black men in this gay subculture are portrayed as cut off from a 'real' world heightens the emphasis on fantasy, and indeed gives *Paris is Burning* its tragic edge" (1992: 154).

In his editing out of Lili's family, Ebershoff evokes this criticism, by manipulating Lili's representation more intensively as a figure of isolation and tragedy. In his interview, the author says he wishes to get to the truth about Lili: "I wanted to convey the emotional essence of Lili's life as she herself perceived it" (323). Yet Ebershoff has sought out and

used from *Man Into Woman* much that is unreal, delusional, and isolating: *The Danish Girl* repeats risible medical science, to the extent of adding the unexplained disappearance of Lili's Adam's apple (237), which *Man Into Woman* doesn't include. To what purpose does he maintain these products of fantasy in a work of classical realism? The result is to recycle twentieth-century cisgender projections of the trans woman as a figure of the not-quite-real, in a generic style that turns the strategized fantasies of the carefully mediated autobiography into Lili's facts. The potential damage of such a representation is evident in Bernstein's review, which takes the realist style as an indication of historical veracity. Bernstein says the novel's storytelling "is told with such psychological delicacy that one has the sense things must actually have transpired the way Mr Ebershoff presents them." Meanwhile the author strips away all that counterbalances the fantasy of physical change, such as the impact of the social realm, and the repetitive self-doubt about not passing or the anxieties and inability of Lili to distance herself psychologically from her family and her past. The family members have been removed by Ebershoff; to what effect, other than to segregate Lili, as well as to simplify her life and her transition to a tragic, silent isolation from society? With his particular perspective, Ebershoff thus records the unlikely parts of the biography without trusting Lili's rationality and motivations for presenting her fantasy in public for a particular purpose. He never asks what is behind the fantasy, why it is being projected, and for whom it is being directed. A consequent effect is that Lili – at an essential level – is a socially and physically castrated cipher in a cisgender fantasy. This is the 'essence' Ebershoff appears keen to describe, one he is in fact projecting.

Conclusion

The opening scene of *The Danish Girl* is pivotal to the simplistic conception of a complex identity: Einar's wife asks Einar to model as a woman; he agrees, and is hooked. It is an interpretation of a multi-layered, biographical transition narrative of multiple authors, distilled within a melodramatic, cinematic moment. Yet while Ebershoff's cinematic piece fails to demonstrate nuance about Lili's testimony, it does reveal the durability of the appeal to cisgender concepts of a male castration narrative involving figurative and physical motifs, for which the story of the transgender woman is appropriated as a suitable vehicle. This includes the unconvincingly effortless switch from male to sexually alluring female, and their erotic consignment from a public sphere of empowerment to another of disempowerment, signified and initiated by Einar/Lili's submission, seduction and encasement in women's underwear.

Ebershoff's personal engagement with the story, meanwhile, also serves as a resonant example of the power of privilege in the shaping of transgender narratives in the public consciousness. Already occupying positions of empowerment in the literary industry by the time of the book's publishing, as publishing director of the Modern Library and editor at Random House (Mudge, 2002), Ebershoff's reward for writing *The Danish Girl* includes winning the Lambda Literary Award for representing transgender identity. In a development of his relationship with Lambda Awards, a place for Ebershoff, now evidently assumed an expert on trans people, is provided on the Lambda Literary Leadership Council, as one of its "group of visionary leaders" (Lambdaliterary.org). This includes Ebershoff establishing with Lambda Literary the

“Lili Elbe scholarship for emerging transgender writers.” An instructive narrative becomes complete: a cisgender writer creates a castration fantasy that accords with the assumptions of a cis-dominated society and its gate-keeping institutions about trans female identity. His derivative work becomes a definitive cultural statement on transgender women, and his patronage now becomes vital to future writers of trans identity. It is this narrative, of the empowerment and enrichment of the cisgender writer David Ebershoff as a gatekeeper of trans female identity, that is arguably the most compelling storyline of *The Danish Girl*.

Chapter 3

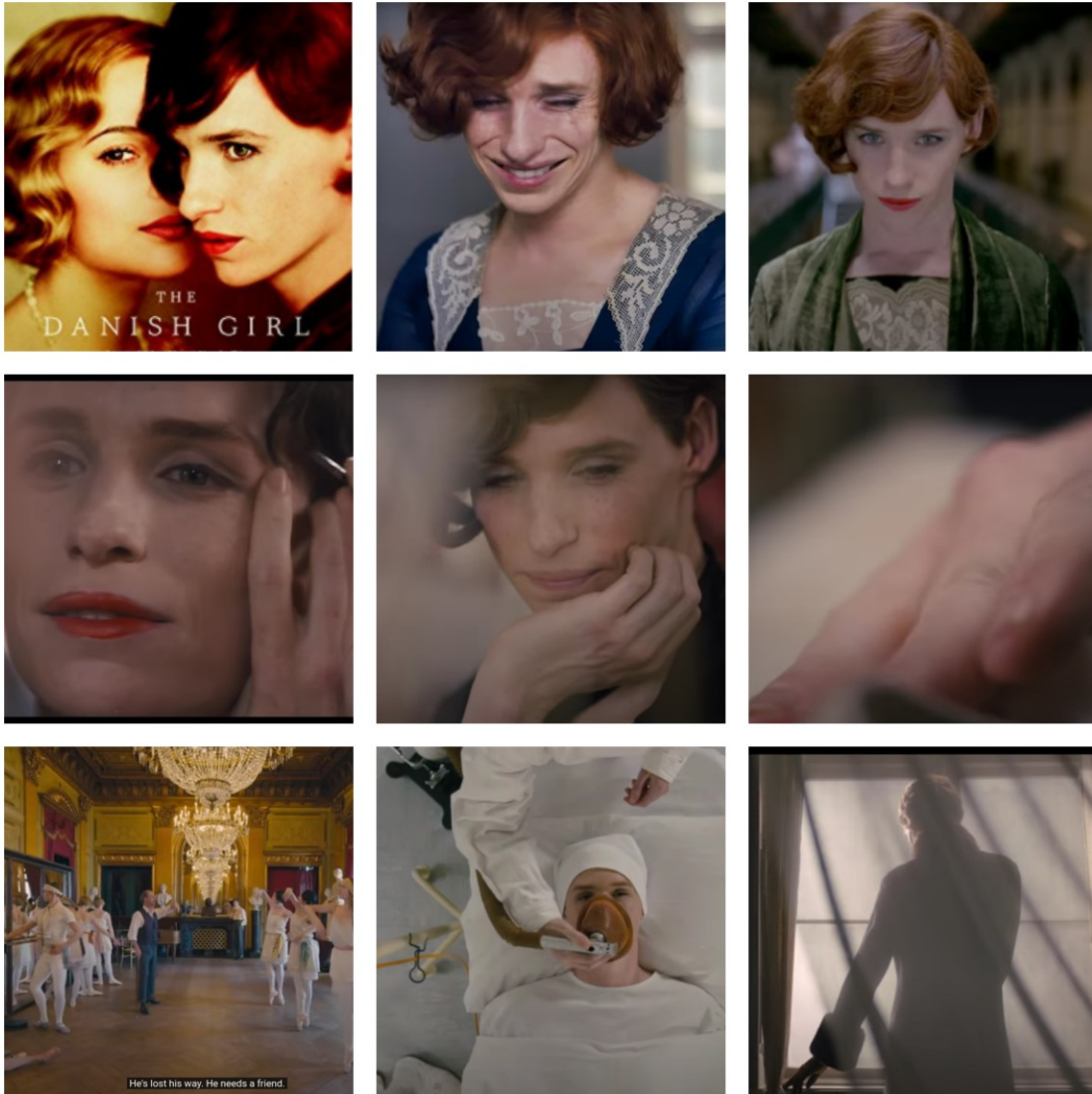
Fictional Movies: Where Transgender and Cisgender Gazes Collide

Introduction: adapting Laura Mulvey's theory of the Male Gaze to include a related Cisgender Gaze in the films *The Danish Girl* and *Girl*

On the prevalence of the Male Gaze in cinema, Laura Mulvey's influential essay from the 1970s continues to resonate as a starting point. Mulvey draws on Lacanian analysis to identify phallogentrism in mainstream Hollywood cinema, claiming, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly" (1999: 837). The functioning of the Male Gaze, according to Mulvey, occurs in three distinct forms: via the camera, the audience, and the film's characters, or as Mulvey says, "that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watched the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion" (843). Adapting this idea for the focus of the chapter, we can also say an associated Cisgender Gaze is at play in films that portray trans women. Potentially, the trans woman becomes an object for both cis men and women, not only sexually in relation to the Male Gaze but also to provoke disgust or unease, or in terms of sympathy by being pitied. Of the latter, the film critic K. Austin Collins says, "we, the cis people in the room, are all too concerned with trans identity as a

physical crisis” (Collins, 2018). In effect, the trans woman’s crisis is the cis audience’s confirmation of cis as the condition of normality. Few films exemplify this process as effectively as *The Danish Girl*, the movie adaptation of Ebershoff’s novel, screen-written by Lucinda Coxon and directed by Tom Hooper, with cis actor Eddie Redmayne in the title role as Lili Elbe. Replication of many of its tropes in a subsequent film *Girl* (2019), directed by Lukas Dhont, underscores the enduring patterns at play.

In terms of the representation of Lili Elbe in *The Danish Girl* film, a useful context is E. Ann Kaplan’s unifying summary of Mulvey’s three-part concept of the cinematic “gaze” as “a one-way subjective vision” (xvi). Exemplifying in their reviews the ‘one-way’ nature of the eye-contact and related interaction with other characters, as well as with the camera and viewing audience, the critic Jonathan Romney describes how Redmayne’s Lili is characterized by “relentlessly working the toothy grins and coy averted gazes” (Romney, 2016), while Ryan Gilbey claims “Lili is an unknowable curiosity, with Redmayne’s performance all mannerism and no inner-life. His one facial expression (gaze lowered, lashes fluttering, face half-turned away in a simpering smile) is like a phrase that becomes ever more banal with each repetition” (Gilbey, 2018). The repeated reference to “averted gazes” and “gaze lowered” is indicative of the overall performance: Redmayne’s Lili appears to present herself as an object for the Male Gaze and consistently inhabits this objectification. As noted by both Romney and Gilbey, Redmayne’s averted/lowered gaze is part of a broader stylized performance, “all mannerism and no inner-life.”



Left to right, from the top, images from promotional texts (novel and film trailer) that underscore the catering of a Male and Cisgender Gaze and construction of a cisgender castration fantasy:

- 1) A promotional image from the film used for the novel, with Eddie Redmayne's depiction of Lili Elbe typically avoiding meeting the camera's gaze.*
- 2) Redmayne's Lili: a figure of increasing lachrymosity and suffering.*

- 3) *A rare image of Lili meeting the camera's gaze, with head tilted slightly down to signify shyness, uncertainty, and submissiveness to the Male Gaze.*
- 4) *The cinematic trans-female trope: Lili putting on make-up.*
- 5) *A typical Redmayne pose in the film, looking down, signifying shy, demure femininity.*
- 6) *The pivotal scene at the beginning: Einar touching women's clothing, the camera lingering on Einar's fingertips as Einar becomes seduced by the sensuousness.*
- 7) *Characteristic of *The Danish Girl* and *Girl*, the refined setting of a ballet school from which Einar/Lili can study the ideal mode of femininity/femaleness, i.e. a slim, graceful ballet dancer amid the whiteness and upper-middle-class surroundings.*
- 8) *Einar/Lili about to have surgery, with excruciating post-surgery effects.*
- 9) *A veil motif, used at different points in the film, here to depict Einar slowly disappearing, but later when drawn between Gerda and Lili across the matrimonial bed to emphasise how their relationship can no longer be sexual.*

With the camera and the audience focusing on Lili, the consolidation of Lili's otherness is produced by the third aspect of the Male Gaze, namely the other characters, none more so than Lili's wife, Gerda, played by Alicia Vikander. It is here that the Cisgender Gaze – as opposed to just a Male one – is confirmed, and the inversion of a sexual objectification is enacted. Gradually, as Einar becomes Lili, a social-physical castration and desexualization effect is produced, and Gerda becomes both exasperated and distressed by the process of her husband's feminization and withdrawal from public

life. Gerda in turn begins to look to the athletic-looking and handsome Alpha Male figure of Hans, played by Matthias Schoenarts, to fulfill the role of the man in her life. She in effect plays the pivotal role of the Cisgender and Heteronormative Everywoman, in this case with sympathy and verisimilitude to which the audience can evidently identify. As the film reviewer Mark Kermode observes favourably in acknowledgment of Vikander's 'Gaze' on behalf of the audience,

“The most extraordinary performance, perhaps, is Alicia Vikander [as Gerda] ... If you didn't believe in the way in which she looks at him and sees her, and she understands that there are two people living together in the person that she loves, and the understanding that she brings to that is actually what mediates the story” (Kermode, 2016).

In alignment with Mulvey's analysis of the three-part mode of the Male Gaze, Kermode's analysis underlines how it is the other characters, including the cis female characters, who gaze at Lili partly on behalf of the audience. To refer back to Kaplan, we have the 'one-way subjective vision' in three different forms, namely the camera, the audience, and the other characters, with Redmayne's Lili obliging with shy, averted eyes. One particular scene encapsulates this relationship between the cisgender audience, characters, and camera on one side, and Lili on the other, when Hans meets with Lili-as-Lili for the first time. Hans's discomfort as well as Gerda's is tangible, in response to Lili's transparent pretense that she is no longer Einar but Einar's cousin (62.11):

Lili: Will you excuse me (Lili rushes from the room)

Gerda: Lili? (Lili retreats to the bedroom and begins to sob. Gerda turns to Hans)
You ought to go.

Hans: Let me help.

Gerda: Please. I'm sorry.

(In the bedroom, Gerda sits across the bed to a weeping Lili)

Lili: I don't think he noticed, do you?

Gerda: I don't know.

Lili: I think I got out just in time.

Gerda: Sleep now. We'll talk more tomorrow.

To different degrees in this exchange, Gerda and Hans intertwine with the cisgender audience as the 'way in' to the film, while also revealing convincing forms of a rational cisgender antagonism to a transness that appears delusional and self-deceiving. Through this troubling scene, the Cisgender Gaze is damning: Gerda and Hans are the adults in the room, trying to understand a child-like character whose trans identity has all the legitimacy of an invisible friend. It is a scene in which cisheteronormativity, personified by Gerda and Hans, reigns supreme, and which then endures for the remainder of the film.

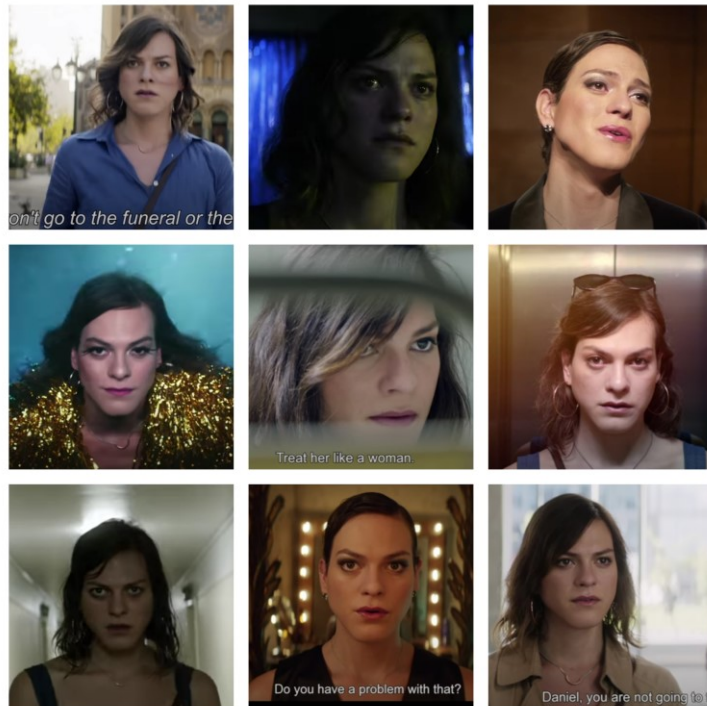
In the suggestion of an enduring pattern, a subsequent film both critically celebrated and maligned, the similarly gender-transition-based *Girl* (2019) directed by Lukas Dhont, recycles many of the trans-related tropes that we see in *The Danish Girl*. This includes the interaction patterns between the trans female protagonist and the other characters, but also in relation to the camera. The film critic Sheila O'Malley for example describes the performance by cis actor Victor Polster, playing the protagonist Lara, as involving "only one note, and a boring one at that: the eye-rolling uncommunicative teenager ... non-revealing, quiet, and sullen" (O'Malley, 2019). More positively, Peter

Bradshaw praises the near-silent mode of expression with the character speaking “in a gentle voice, almost a murmur” (Bradshaw, 2019). Verbal communication, eye contact, and other forms of non-verbal expression, either way, are at a minimum. Polster’s Lara, like Redmayne’s Lili, can be said in turn to conform to the traditional model of the ‘Good Transsexual’ identified in the scholarship of Emily Skidmore. Writing on the media fascination with U.S. trans woman Christine Jorgenson in the 1950s, Skidmore describes how the Nordic-looking Jorgenson embodies traits of “domesticity, respectability, and heterosexuality” (271), and within the context of race, “white womanhood as chaste, moral, and refined” (293). Similar to the origins of Lili Elbe and Christine Jorgenson’s own ancestry, *Girl* is set in a northern European country, on this occasion Belgium, and features a tall, slim, white female figure, Polster’s blond hair, blue eyes and full lips a slight adjustment to Eddie Redmayne’s red-haired protagonist. The settings are also, to refer back to Skidmore’s analysis, conspicuously “refined”: as with the scenes in *The Danish Girl* where Einar/Lili begins to experiment with cross-dressing, much of *Girl* also takes place in a ballet school. With this refinement and its connection to an idealized mode of middle-class femininity, we also see how class is not only bound up in gendered ideals, but can also be used to simplify the story arc and shape the level of safety for the audience. The upper/middle-class setting cocoons the characters from various outside forces and pressures, whether economic or social, and allows the transition to dominate the film without distraction.

The emphasis on the physical crisis identified by Collins is also consistent in both *The Danish Girl* and *Girl*. Both protagonists share a posture that alternates between the fragile and the broken. For Redmayne’s Lili the physical crisis appears through stomach

cramps and the ‘menstrual’ nosebleeds, for Polster’s Lara, by her crushed toes as she dances *en pointe* and the cramped genitalia bound tightly with tape that ultimately inhibits her ability to have surgery. More harrowingly, both films end in forms of fatal or near-fatal physical castration. While *The Danish Girl* concludes in an agonizing and ultimately unsuccessful medically sanctioned sex-reassignment surgery, *Girl* ends with a gruesome act of self-mutilation involving a large pair of scissors. Part of the Cisgender Gaze appears to require not only an objectified, barely communicative figure, occupying scenes of refinement and/or domesticity, but also the sight of the ‘physical crisis’ identified by Collins.

The Transgender Gaze in *A Fantastic Woman*



Images from the promotional trailer: Marina's Transgender Gaze (from left to right, starting top)

- 1) Marina processing how some of Orlando's family members have demanded that she stays away from Orlando's wake.*
- 2) Marina having wandered the city streets, now in a disco, tearful without being lachrymose as she briefly sees the ghost of Orlando.*
- 3) The film's final scene: Marina singing an aria to an audience in a refined auditorium.*
- 4) The surreal disco scene where Marina recovers her confidence, dancing among other, glitter-clad women, before a force hoists her up to the camera above, her Gaze firmly meeting the camera's.*
- 5) Marina subjected to a physical examination, arranged with sadistic relish by Commissioner Cortez, who refuses to leave the room as Marina is photographed naked. This gaze reveals Marina's angry awareness of the way she is being discussed.*
- 6) An image used as a promotional text, Marina in an elevator, gazing enigmatically, and directly, at the camera.*
- 7) After walking the streets in rainfall, Marina approaching her sister's apartment, with nowhere else to stay, simmering with frustration both at the bigotry she experiences and at her dependence on others.*
- 8) Marina preparing for her performance at the film's end, in the trailer with her voice asking rhetorically, 'Do you have a problem with that?'*
- 9) Orlando's ex-wife deliberately deadnaming Marina with her former name, while informing her she cannot come to the wake; Marina gazing directly into her eyes, refusing to be cowed by her bullying.*

A shift in cultural production occurs in the representation in *A Fantastic Woman* (*Una mujer fantástica*) (2017) involving the trans character of Marina, played by trans actress Daniela Vega, and the Transgender Gaze that characterizes her performance. To accommodate its emergence at an analytical level, the work of Paul Willemen (1994), Stefanie van de Peer (2017), and Jack Halberstam (2013) are useful for the added dimensions they identify. Building on Mulvey's idea of the three-part 'gaze,' Willemen introduces the idea of a fourth look, "the look at the viewer" (107). The concept of the gaze and the process-related act of looking is developed further by van de Peer, who distinguishes from the word 'gaze', a more interactive possibility, namely 'seeing':

"The word 'seeing' implies an ethical reconciliation between two subjects. As opposed to gazing or looking, seeing enables a true intersubjectivity, and implies understanding and acceptance. This activity of seeing is transnationally significant: if one 'sees' the other through the act of looking, one acknowledges the other's subjectivity and therefore establishes a reciprocal relationship based on proximity, allegiance, understanding and solidarity" (11).

Concerning the characteristics of "proximity, allegiance, understanding and solidarity" highlighted by van de Peer, it should be said that this leaves significant room for different types of 'Transgender Gaze.' Some are apparently radical in their presence or desire for society to question its conception of gender, others offering a certain kind of transgender figure the right to enter the public space via the embodiment of conformity. In an analysis of various films characterized by a Transgender Gaze, Jack Halberstam says,

“For some audiences, the transgender body confirms a fantasy of fluidity so common to notions of transformation within the postmodern. To others, the transgender body confirms the enduring power of the binary gender system. But to still other viewers, the transgender body represents a Utopian vision of a world of subcultural possibilities” (2013: 129).

Utilizing Halberstam’s analysis, it can be said that *A Fantastic Woman* produces, with its assimilationist narrative, a Gaze that most obviously “confirms the enduring power of the binary gender system.” Given the castration-focused, gender-transition narratives of mainstream films like *The Danish Girl* and *Girl*, the accomplishment of this filmic incorporation of the trans woman into a social setting, without bodily crisis, is not inconsiderable, and deserves analysis for succeeding where other films have failed, often so harrowingly.

i. **Developing a Representation of a Twenty-First-Century Trans Woman:
Rejecting the Crisis of the Body, Championing her Legitimacy and
Citizenship**

While *The Danish Girl* and *Girl* establish a backdrop of social realism for their cisgender castration fantasies, *A Fantastic Woman* (2017) ironically uses its occasional magical-realist style to locate its central character in a grittier reality. Whether striding alone through the city streets or confronting adversity with enigmatic poise, Vega’s Marina represents a departure especially from Redmayne’s coy and lachrymose interpretation of a domestic-centred Lili Elbe. As film critic Helen O’Hara says, “the

camera rarely leaves Vega for long. But she meets it, authoritative, daring you to look away” (O’Hara, 2018). O’Hara’s description indicates how Marina’s Gaze appears to meet Willemen’s ‘fourth look,’ namely the look at the viewer. Several scenes have Marina maintaining her Gaze towards a hostile character or situation (see images above), including during interactions with a police chief, and with Orlando’s ex-wife. Other notable moments include Marina looking directly into the camera at the end of a surreal dance scene in a club, and separately in an elevator, establishing in turn a shot that is used to promote the film. It is a Gaze which reacts with defiant pride against the attempt to objectify transness.

In *A Fantastic Woman*, therefore, we see a contrast with Redmayne’s passive transgender protagonist in *The Danish Girl*, with Lili’s coy glances acknowledging and adhering to her objectification. In Vega’s consistently assertive return of Gaze, a different subjectivity is established against the Male/Cisgender one, as she combines poise with defiance. A new, more confident trans female identity, in other words, is being represented in a mainstream film.

ii. **Exemplifying twenty-first-century trans female discourse: Marina measured against the analyses by Julia Serano and Sonny Nordmarken on media-constructed tropes and microaggressions**

The protagonist’s projection of a poised self-assurance via a fourth look, a ‘Transgender Gaze,’ is one significant hallmark of *A Fantastic Woman* as a radically affirming representation of a twenty-first-century transgender woman. Analysis by Julia

Serano of many of the issues confronted by trans women in the public space, in this respect, also aligns with *A Fantastic Woman*. This includes the exclusion of familiar tropes relating to imagery of the trans woman's cosmetic styling in front of a mirror, while being 'watched' by the camera and the audience. In this respect, it is worth comparing with Serano's analysis of mainstream media coverage concerning the pressure on trans women to produce such an image in a representation:

"The filmmaker was noticeably disappointed when I showed up ... wearing a T-shirt, jeans and sneakers. She eventually asked me if I would mind putting on lipstick while she filmed me ... She shot a small amount of footage anyway (sans lipstick) and said she would get in touch with me if she decided to use any of it. I never heard back from her" (2016: 45).

Serano's experience is instructive when we see such a recurring focus on shots of putting on make-up and clothing in *The Danish Girl*, whose key incident involves Einar/Lili's touch of women's clothing as the signifier of their transness. More broadly, the transition/castration narrative is absent in *A Fantastic Woman*, where we never see the protagonist either putting on make-up or savouring the touch of women's clothing. On physical crisis and surgery/castration, meanwhile, Alice Blackhurst's review observes,

"Throughout the film, Marina is coerced by various bystanders ... to reveal whether she has had The Operation. Yet, in line with trans activism's efforts to respect transitioning subjects' privacy and to validate the state of being 'in-between' independent of biological coordinates, [director] Lelio refuses to provide an answer either way" (Blackhurst, 2018).

The film's avoidance of a 'transition' narrative underscores its apparent alterity. We have a trans female character who is separated from a narrative arc filled with intrusive clichés involving bodily crisis, the visible construction/adoption of femininity, and submission to objectification. Partly via the return of Marina's Gaze to inappropriate questions, the film rejects the attentions of an enduring cultural fascination involving the genitalia of trans people and the assumed succumbing to social and anatomical castration. In turn, the film encapsulates the message of Serano's own position, which challenges "the male myth that men's power and domination arises from the penis. What's between my legs is not a phallic symbol, nor a tool of rape and oppression; it is merely my genitals" (2016: 31). The film treats Marina's body with a similar lack of fetishistic fascination and focuses instead on her emotional experience trapped within a challenging externally-created situation. When questions appear to deviate towards her transness and/or an implied paraphilic or sexually perverted relationship, Marina shuts them down with a curt response and a defiant gaze. Such moments include an exchange between Marina and the Commissioner responsible for Sexual and Minor Crimes, Adriana Cortez, (28.09), who is assigned to the investigation of Orlando's death:

Cortez: One question. Mr Orlando-

Marina: Oneto.

Cortez: Yes. Was he paying you?

Marina: We were a couple.

Cortez: You loved each other, then? It wasn't just sexual?

Marina: (gazes firmly and says emphatically to Cortez) It was a normal relationship between two consenting adults.

The attempt to frame Marina's identity in terms of sexual kink is continued by Orlando's wife, who informs Marina that she views their relationship as a "perversion" (43.50). Via this representation, we also see how the film addresses the twenty-first-century recognition of microaggressions faced by trans women in the public space. As Sonny Nordmarken says, such microaggressions involve,

"asking gender- and sex-related questions about a person's body, genitalia, identity, or history; expressing concern about a trans person interacting with children; implying that gender-affirmation surgeries constitute 'mutilation' or that trans people are 'mentally ill' or 'freakish'; approaching non-sex-worker trans women for paid sex; offering intended compliments such as 'you turned out so cute' or 'I never would have known'; evaluating a person's gender presentation; exposing a person's trans identity" (2014: 130).

Committing many of these characteristic microaggressions is Commissioner Cortez, whose passive-aggressive switches of engagement typify the aspersions on Marina's character and the nature of her relationship with Orlando (30.19):

Cortez: Look, I got twenty-three years working in the streets. Fourteen years in this brigade. I'm a specialist ... I know well what happens with people ... Sorry, with women, like you. I've seen it all. All of it. I want you to know I understand and support you. Did you have to defend yourself against him?

(Marina gazes at her)

Marina: Am I under arrest?

Cortez: No. (Coldly) You'd better not leave Santiago.

With such engagements punctuated by shifts from polite inquiry to hostility and delegitimization, including deadnaming and innuendo, the pressure is implicitly on Marina to submit to the formal authority and normative privilege of the cisgender figure. The Cisgender Gaze of characters within the film operates to establish a trans female threat harbouring male violence or male physicality. As Serano says of the navigation by trans women of this real-artificial binary established by the Cisgender Gaze, “This essentially puts trans women in a double bind: If they act feminine they are perceived as being a parody, but if they act masculine it is seen as a sign of their true male identity” (49). Marina is accordingly trapped between a series of responses, with either of them a means of disempowering her.

Key to Marina’s survival and the avoidance of such relentless, informal policing, in fact, is how the visibility of her transness is turned off and on by the film’s story: when working as a waitress, Marina’s transness is apparently invisible, and this allows her to earn the money that affords her independence. In reflection of the protagonist’s cis-passing appearance, O’Hara describes Vega’s Marina in her film review as “a rather glamorous, very beautiful young woman” (O’Hara, 2018). Yet in spite of this crucial element, in some scenes at the hospital or with Orlando’s family, Marina’s transness is depicted as visible and it provokes the kind of dramatic scenes that shake the audience. Arguably, it is a mediated transness whose Gaze is also a narrative tool. Halberstam says of the potentially intermittent nature of the Transgender Gaze in film, “The transgender gaze becomes difficult to track because it depends on complex relations in time and space between seeing and not seeing, appearing and disappearing, knowing and not knowing” (120). There is accordingly in *A Fantastic Woman* both a narrative and ideological

purpose for this selective visibility/invisibility, namely to ensure that Marina – and others like her – can ultimately prosper in this world, the ultimately uplifting message of the film. Were Marina to consistently face the kind of hostility in relation to employment, or in the attempt at a singing career as she suffers from Orlando’s family, the police, and medical authorities, then *A Fantastic Woman* would be a very different kind of film, with likely a much less triumphant and joyous ending. A film, in other words, that might not have the feel-good factor and accordingly be so commercially successful.

iii. **Marina as neoliberal paragon**

Via the on/off visibility of Marina’s transness, therefore, *A Fantastic Woman* works according to its own narrative and ideological boundaries. To refer back to Halberstam’s study, “For some audiences, the transgender body confirms a fantasy of fluidity so common to notions of transformation within the postmodern. To others, the transgender body confirms the enduring power of the binary gender system.” To this it can be added that the transgender body confirms neoliberal society as a canvas for individual fulfillment. As Dan Irving says,

“Transsexual individuals can be viewed as viable neoliberal subjects: they have proven to be flexible and fluid, self-sufficient, and major contributors to their families, workplaces, communities, and societies. To many, emphasizing the normative potential of transsexuality has been a successful strategy to counter the marginalizing effects of pathologization” (2013: 26).

In its middle-class setting with its heteronormative, cis-passing trans woman, *A Fantastic Woman* can be said to represent “the normative potential of transsexuality.” In terms of the socio-economic climate, Marina establishes a mode of self-sufficiency and a departure from the oppressiveness of State and Familial sovereignty, as she affirms the appearance of a Stateless sovereignty of neoliberal individualism. Some of the exclusions that Marina encounters, for example, are institutional, and establish a binary between individual freedom of expression and bureaucratic oppression. Yet equally, the exchanges with Cortez are personalized. They reveal Cortez as a bully who revels in the power she exercises over a vulnerable transgender woman. Institutions in *A Fantastic Woman* are therefore the habitat of sadistic individuals. It is Cortez who demands, in a Kafkaesque demonstration of power, an apparently unnecessary physical examination of Marina. Marina’s anguish is clear as she attempts to resist, yet Cortez is intransigent, partly in revenge for Marina’s failure to attend a prior meeting:

Cortez: I only want to make sure you don’t have injuries.

Marina: But I don’t have injuries.

Cortez: Then it won’t be a problem.

The system here diminishes Marina’s transness but it does so through personalization – Cortez is utilizing the power of institutions to pursue grudges and enforce personal bias. This optic of personalization then switches away from Cortez to Marina’s interaction with her sibling and Orlando’s family. Of the former, Marina’s sister and partner Gaston provide Marina with shelter and ostensible emotional and unconditional support, but their own relationship is characterized by a frequent eruption of quarrelling that is both comedic and ultimately unbearable, with a typical exchange being (75.07):

Sister: Why are you always telling me what to do?

Gaston: No, I didn't ...

The support of family, as depicted in these scenes, suggests it is in Marina's interest to find her own place away from the support of her family networks, pushing her along towards her own individual triumph. More dramatically, the family of Orlando contributes to a binary between their almost poisonous tribal faction and Marina's untainted individual integrity and innocence. Overall, Marina is visibly safe only when in her own place. To a degree, this safety in her solitude and privacy underlines an ideological quality of what Lisa Duggan calls, in relation to a neoliberal-acceptable LGBT+ identity, "a 'neutral' state. The argument being made is, 'you can do what you want' (the concession to privacy) and 'you can be who you are' (the concession of identity), but 'you can't spread it around on MY dime'" (1994: 8). Marina, as an independent-minded, self-reliant woman, can be said to embody all these qualities in the film as the right kind of trans woman in a twenty-first-century neoliberal world. In turn, Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade critique this neoliberal transgender narrative in relation to the U.S.. They describe the "hero mindset" involving,

"rags-to-riches, 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps,' streets 'paved with gold' ...

These narratives hide the uneven concentration of wealth, resources, and opportunity among different groups of people – the ways in which not everybody can just do anything if they put their minds to it and work hard enough" (2013: 659).

Consistent with this analysis, the trans protagonist of *A Fantastic Woman* evidently does work hard enough to get her own apartment, while her singing talent is rewarded at the

end with her performance at a prestigious concert. The difference with *The Danish Girl* and *Girl* in this respect is notable: in these latter films, the protagonist is already established in the refined spaces of art galleries or ballet schools; in effect, there is no class-based journey, no material arc. In *A Fantastic Woman*, the protagonist only achieves a comparable setting – the prestigious and ‘refined’ music auditorium – at the end. Prior to this, her one performance at the beginning is as a cabaret singer in a hotel bar, which she appears to balance elsewhere with her waitressing job. It is a story not only of transness, therefore, but also the material rewards of social mobility and its association with determination and talent. Marina, in other words, has had to earn her refined space and her legitimacy as a woman.

iv. ***A Transgenre Movie and the triumph of the individual liberated from cliché: the multiple contexts that allow for the Transgender woman to shape her own story***

With Marina’s relative accomplishments at the film’s end, an implicit connection is formed between class and possibility: with sufficient income and with the flexibility that comes with solitude, the trans woman can achieve the simultaneous goals of self-actualization and the reassuring conditions of social conformity and economic independence. Departing from the industrial-era capitalism that demanded the nuclear family as its ideal social unit, as noted by Foucault (1998 [1976]), in neoliberalism, it is arguably the flexibility of the unattached individual who is idealized, and it is here that we see how LGBT+ aspiration can intertwine seductively with a neoliberal culture. In

this case, it occurs with a generally cis-passing trans woman who earns sufficient income from a job to afford her own apartment, while being blessed with an exceptional singing voice, itself having benefited from formal training. Halberstam asks, “What would a transgender film look like that did not punish the transgender subject for his or her inflexibilities and for failing to deliver the fantasy of fluidity that cinematic audiences so desire?” (2013: 127). *A Fantastic Woman* is arguably a neoliberal response to this question. With the necessary exceptional talent and economic and cis-passing conditions to shape a happy ending, the story allows for a transgender story that is liberated from one shaped by transition and thwarted ambition. In effect, the trans woman needs this kind of individualistic, ideally institution-less society in order to thrive. With this context, it is worth noting Halberstam’s analysis of another trans-based film, *By Hook Or By Crook*, which Halberstam lauds for the establishment of its own Transgender Gaze, and which generates “a vision of community, possibility and redemption through collaboration” (129). *A Fantastic Woman* is evidently no such type of film: it is instead the triumph of individualism and personal responsibility, while eschewing various social networks and relationships.

With her material platform, Marina’s story develops a quirky, and in some ways liberating character of its own. Freed from adhering to the tropes of a transition narrative, for example, genres multiply and blur. Several critics have noted how *A Fantastic Woman* “could be described as a romantic film, but it is also a thriller in some ways, a mystery; it is a social drama, and a character study, but with hints of fantasy” (*Curzonblog*, 2018). Marina not only encounters antagonism caused by her transness; she is sometimes depicted processing her grief towards her deceased lover, while also a

heroine in a ghost story, and in one sub-plot she carries out her own investigation, detective-like, concerning a mysterious key left by Orlando. Marina therefore has several ‘plotscares’ to experience, emphasizing her agency. She is therefore able to embark on distinct, individualized quests that take her away from the single, oppressive arc and its tropes that dominate *The Danish Girl* especially.

In this vein, there are various chthonic moments that irrupt during the social drama of the film, and which reveal how the director purposefully rejects the gender-transition narrative. Lelio says in fact that the intention is to create a “transgenre film” (*Curzonblog*, 2018). Kermode says of one of the generic threads, “beneath it all is a ghost story, the image of Orlando haunting his love, reflected in glass – so near, yet so far” (Kermode, 2018). Outside the crematorium towards the film’s end, and uncertain of whether to continue with her plan to see Orlando’s body one last time, Marina becomes aware of the ghost of Orlando walking beyond her, leading her to a subterranean scene of darkness where his body is being prepared for cremation (85.51). Kermode notes the “fable-like quality” of the storytelling here, of how “she follows an apparition deep into the kingdom of the dead.” Other mystical settings include entering a dark nightclub of lasers and flashing lights with throbbing music that briefly produces a scene of magical realism, culminating in the rejuvenation of Marina’s self-confidence when Marina suddenly soars up to the camera. Her gaze/look is defiant again: the internalized Cisgender Gaze has gone, the Transgender Gaze has returned, offering the audience an opportunity for the audience-involving intersubjectivity identified by van de Peer.

Arguably coming closest to the point of physical crisis is Marina’s ‘quest’ involving the mysterious key left behind by Orlando, a scene depicted enigmatically. In

an ethereal setting, and combining the chthonic with noir, Marina descends into the male quarters of a sauna, seeking a particular locker she has deduced to match Orlando's key. With no choice but to present as male, Marina wraps her towel around her waist, a situation O'Hara describes as "an abnegation of her identity that is intensely upsetting viewing." Kermode describes the scene as involving "a voyage into the underworld from which she must emerge strengthened and renewed," an atmosphere intensified by Marina's suspenseful desire to find resolution. For Kermode, it encapsulates the film's unpredictable flights into a "quasi-Lynchian detective thriller" that leads "the narrative down a rabbit hole." The 'transgenre' effect here can be said on the one hand to destabilize both the audience's conception of transgender storytelling, personalizing a narrative through the prism of "an amorphous world," where "the borderline between night and day, consciousness and unconsciousness, is blurred" (O'Malley, 2018). The certainties of the Cisgender Gaze, in other words, become destabilized in an underworld of steam, shadows, and silhouettes, where sex/gender morphs from one thing to another, and then back again. In this moment, Halberstam's analysis of the diversity of the Transgender Gaze is also evoked, simultaneously we see "a fantasy of fluidity" reminding the cisgender audience that Marina is different to them, before her re-emergence from this steamy, subterranean setting into the light as a cis-passing woman again. The moment can in fact be interpreted in a variety of ways: as a tantalizing example that other types exist outside the cisgender majority, or alternatively, that the sauna scene represents the sliver of a bodily crisis for Marina and the audience when her female identity must become compromised, in order for her to complete her quest with the key. Here perhaps is the queerest and most destabilizing moment in the film

concerning Marina's identity, and it is temporary, in a film that generally plays it safe with Marina's humanity and relatability in relation to the cisgender norm.

With a more transparent and prolonged arc of affirmation is the use of a genre that recurs in the film and that connects with some trans testimonies, namely urban gothic, with the trans woman framed by cisgender characters temporarily as an urban monster. As Anson Koch-Rein says generally, "The monster, then, is a central figure in representations of trans*, serving widely divergent narratives of transphobic insult and trans* resistance alike" (2014: 135). The related genre of horror is a recognizable one in literature by trans women, perhaps most famously Susan Stryker's essay 'My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix' which represents the trans woman's interrogation and appropriation of the pariah status: "Through the operation of rage, the stigma itself becomes the source of transformative power" (2006: 253). In *Fantastic Woman*, the audience is exposed to the repression of Marina's rage over a series of ugly hostilities from cisgender people. This includes when Marina is stared at distrustfully by various officials uncertain of her gender, before Orlando's ex-wife Sonia informs her she is "an illusion" (43.40). The calm tone of the abuse appears designed to exacerbate the gas-lit effect by giving it the impression of a reasonable opinion:

"You know, when I married Orlando, I was thirty-eight. We were quite normal, we were ... we had a normal life. So, when he ... came to me and explained everything, I ... Well ... I thought then ... I'm sorry if I'm a bit brutal ... and direct when I try to say things, but I really think that in this, there's only perversion."

We see in the dehumanizing and monsterring of Marina a strategic value, a way of leveraging personal interest. Sonia's strategy to delegitimize Marina as a woman and as a

person is also evident in a more potentially violent form with Orlando's adult son Bruno. Like Sonia, he frames Marina as a kind of non-human (38.14):

Bruno: Do you know there are two types of pet owners? Mammal owners and bird or reptile owners. If they're mammals, we have a neocortex, a more evolved neuronal layer, where emotions are generated. Empathy and tenderness are also generated there. And love.

Marina: I don't see anybody here with an alligator. I don't get your analysis. Are you trying to tell me something?

Bruno: I'm not saying anything. (He stares her up and down) Did you go under the knife?

Marina: You don't ask that.

Bruno: Why not? I don't get what you are.

Marina: The same as you.

Bruno: Yeah. Right ... I only need to know when you're leaving this place.

Marina: A few weeks.

Bruno: (Voice rising) No, not a few weeks. Give me an exact day or I'll kick you out ... (He goes after her, grabs her and holds her against the wall, his face close to hers). Incredible. My dad was crazy. (He goes to the door). If you steal something, I'll know.

The revulsion projected upon Marina climaxes when members of Orlando's family drag her into their pick-up truck, pinning her down while wrapping her face with tape (66.00). Marina briefly becomes as they see her transness, her face disfigured: hers is now the internalized Cisgender Gaze. She is left to wander back alleys with her face twisted and

distorted, where again she sees herself in a dark reflection like a monster seeing itself, arguably in an urban gothic narrative of a freak or monster. Tearing off the tape from her face, the Transgender Gaze then begins its process of restoration.

Overall, in several encounters with Orlando's family members, Marina remains simultaneously expressive and restrained, a study in dignity. She refuses to respond to the different kinds of provocation, from the deadnaming and misgendering to homophobic insults and physical violence. Yet by the time of their final confrontation outside Orlando's funeral, Marina's 'Transgender rage' and 'queer fury' finally erupts, as the ex-wife and adult son shout abuse and mis-gender her from their car for blocking their path. Submitting to their projection while also exploiting it, Marina climbs upon their car, snarling at them through the windscreen (83.35). The fear of the family is depicted with comical cowardice, ensuring Marina's performance remains sympathetic to the audience. In this moment, the tradition within trans writing identified by Koch-Rein is evoked, "It is precisely the monster's ambivalent ability to speak to oppression and negative affect that appeals to trans* people reclaiming the monster for their own voices." Marina arguably does so here, with the 'monster' projection disarmed, and those activating the projection rendered pathetic.

After her temporary appropriation of the 'monster,' the protagonist consolidates her own Gaze as a largely cis-passing trans woman of exceptional artistic talent, a working-class girl who ascends into a prestigious upper-/middle-class setting. In meeting the voyeuristic Male/Cisgender Gaze, not least at the film's end, Marina possesses its counter, a defiant return, Willemsen's 'look at the viewer.' Yet it is potentially more than this: it is also the symbolic climax and maximum point of respect and admiration by the

audience, recognized by van de Peer in terms of “reconciliation between two subjects,” eliciting “proximity, allegiance, understanding and solidarity” and more broadly “subjectivity, sympathy and solidarity” (3, 9). With the narrative structure and characterization establishing Marina as a figure with which to be sympathized in the film according to homonormative norms, there is little question that the film is constructed by its makers with this expectation of ‘sympathy and solidarity’ from the audience, without relying on many of the tropes which historically isolate and distance the transgender figure.

Conclusion

Given the enduring dominance of the Male/Cisgender Gaze in shaping representations of transness in film, Marina’s Transgender Gaze in *A Fantastic Woman* is a notable development. Her triumph is also an individual one, where she demonstrates grace and resilience in a symbolically solo performance. Marina’s familial networks of support, including the squabbling of her sister and partner, and the lover’s family that despises her, indicate the limits of traditional, familial relationships. Love itself, in fact, is unreliable, given the death of Marina’s lover at the outset, the hostility of the lover’s family, and the fraught and exhausting nature of her sister’s relationship to Gaston. There is queerness here too, because redemption is not tied to marriage and procreation – the thwarted dream of Lili Elbe. The recurring portrayal of Marina walking alone through the city streets is literal and thematic: her courage and integrity come from her independence, and these are the qualities that protect her.

Tenuously, queer and neoliberal narratives, at the rhetorical level at least, appear to converge in the story of *A Fantastic Woman*. However, implicitly underpinning the convergence are the advantages that Marina enjoys. Mobility and continued self-actualization are possible for Marina because they are founded on talent, generally cis-passing looks, and economic conditions that allow her access into middle-class opportunities. In portraying the process of finding a new place to live as incidental, *A Fantastic Woman* reveals its own set of assumptions. Irving's question about the selection of particular transgender bodies is an important one here: "Whose bodies are the most productive and most effortlessly absorbed into capitalist employment pools?" (27). Marina's is one such body.

Chapter 4

The Transgender Voice in Memoir

Introduction

A Fantastic Woman reveals a mode of filmic storytelling that encompasses a Transgender Gaze in different forms. Via the frameworks of Stefanie van de Peer and Jack Halberstam particularly, we see the formation of a ‘fourth’ Gaze emerging beyond the original triadic Male-centred, and by association Cisgender-centred, Gaze propounded in Laura Mulvey’s theory. As we see with the protagonist Marina in *A Fantastic Woman*, it extends from defiance against the potentially delegitimizing assumptions found in a Male and Cisgender Gaze, to the development of an intersubjectivity between protagonist/subject and audience, an act of ‘seeing’ for the audience.

Film is not the only publicly disseminated textual space to feature a trans female body, however. Historically, the mainstream representation most characteristic of trans female experience, certainly for the cisgender-majority public in the Anglophone Global North, is the autobiography or memoir (Aizura, 2018; Hausman, 1995). At this point, a definition that establishes the difference between autobiography and memoir is necessary given how most twenty-first-century published trans-written testimonies conform to ‘memoir,’ in contrast to the trend of autobiographies in the twentieth century. This

difference illustrates in turn the democratization of the twenty-first-century trans-produced testimony to younger, socio-economically less privileged figures describing the portion of their lived experiences ‘so far’:

“Memoirs usually cover only part of the author’s life ... [and] can be about anybody. People read them because of their subject, theme, or style ...

Autobiographies cover the author’s entire life ... are usually about famous and important people ... are usually written in chronological order, from birth to the present day ... [and] places greater emphasis on facts and history [rather than memoir’s] greater emphasis on emotional experience and interiority” (Hussey, 2018).

The fact that memoir is more open to younger, more diverse, and socio-economically disadvantaged voices is indicative of another factor at play in published testimonies in the twenty-first century, namely neoliberal culture and its selectively liberating, exclusionary, and exploitative relationship with marginalized peoples. As Leigh Gilmore says,

“the current boom in memoir would be inconceivable were it not for the social and political movements of the past thirty years that have made it possible for a broader range of people to publish accounts of their live experiences. Women, people of color, gay men and lesbians, the disabled, and survivors of violence have contributed to the expansion of self-representation by illuminating suppressed histories and creating new emphases” (2001: 16).

The idea presented by Gilmore here, of “social and political movements” opening up new opportunities for marginalized voices, it must be qualified again, is limited. This is in much the same way in mainstream cinema that even sympathetic and affirming trans

female representations are currently limited to characters like Marina, within narratives of upward mobility for those resourceful and resourced enough to earn such mobility.

It is at this point also necessary to mark some of the connections and differences between Transgender Gaze and Voice. Of the former, its visual nature connects it distinctively to filmic or pictorial representations. Depicted with sympathy, the Gaze primarily belongs to the trans subject on our screens as well as covers of magazines and books, but its impact is multiple. According to Paul Willemen and Stefanie van de Peer, the audience enters an intersubjective relationship with the subject's Gaze, a fourth look, interacting with the camera and other characters in the film that sees what the trans subject sees, and arguably feels what they feel, via the generation of empathy. The Gaze in this respect becomes a form of Voice, itself a historically vital word in the liberation and autonomy of the trans subject who speaks for themselves in the first person, rather than being spoken for. Drawing on analyses by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, Andrew Anastasia says the Voice,

“is an apropos keyword for transgender studies, as the field rests on the demand that ‘the embodied experience of the speaking subject’ subtend any analysis of transgender phenomena ... trans scholars ‘have enabled the coherent voices of trans people to be heard throughout the academy.’ This discursive coherence has been a necessary strategy to combat logics of pathologization” (2014: 262).

The Trans Voice, with this interpretation, is the assertion of trans subjectivity in the public realm, as historically mediated as it has been with commercial and cultural implications in relation to cisgender audiences. In this respect, the problems encountered in the construction of a Voice are similar to that of the Gaze, in the way gatekeeping by a

Male and Cisgender lens historically permits and shapes the subject according to its norms. In an echo of Mulvey's analysis on the Male Gaze in film, Carolyn Heilbrun writes about the production of female autobiography. Citing Mary Jacobus, she observes how, "The problem, again ... [is that] 'Women's access to discourse involves submission to phallogentricity, to the masculine and the symbolic: refusal, on the other hand, risks reinscribing the feminine as a yet more marginal madness or nonsense'" (1988: 41). The solution for women's writing up to her time of writing of the 1980s, Heilbrun indicates, has been through various media and domains of expression beyond the gatekeeping of traditional publishing:

"The constraints on women's writing the truth about their lives were lifted first by women poets, sometimes in their poetry, sometimes in essays, books, and interviews. These women, all of them middle class and white, simultaneously dismantled the past and reimagined the future" (60).

Heilbrun's reference to the identities of the published women, as white and middle-class, replicates a similar limitation with representations of transgender subjectivity. Privileged positions in the Anglophone Global North regarding race/ethnicity and class, in the case of trans testimonies evident in the mainstream predominance of Lili Elbe, Christine Jorgenson, and Jan Morris, have historically excluded people of colour and the economically disadvantaged. Ideologically too, the published narratives appear to share a complicity with hegemonic norms of relatively liberated middle-class lives. In the neoliberal paradigm of the twenty-first century, the factors underpinning the international and commercial success of *A Fantastic Woman* appear to include an apolitical narrative that celebrates individualism, as measured by the markers of material wealth, including

upgrades in employment and housing, and acceptance at the highest, most prestigious levels and locations in society. Compared to the audience, the characters may be different linguistically, nationally, and even ethnically. Nevertheless, visually, materially, and in terms of arc, the story is sufficiently identifiable for audiences in the Anglophone Global North to develop an easy empathy. Politically, furthermore, there is no critique of issues of inequality, so stark in the neoliberal state of Chile for example, in consideration of *A Fantastic Woman*, where U.S. imperialism has worked covertly for several decades (Guardiola-Rivera, 2013; Klein, 2007). Equally, in this film, there are no exposures, no critiques, subtextual or otherwise, about poverty, homelessness, or the institutional oppressions that make upward mobility potentially impossible for so many.

Testimonies that challenge the ideological status quo, meanwhile, appear to encounter short shrift, commercially speaking, from cinemas and audiences in the Anglophone Global North. While failing to acknowledge the role of institutional and commercial gatekeeping that encourages some types of narratives over others, Slavoj Žižek appears correct in identifying the accommodation of minority identities within neoliberal capitalism as part of “the ideological effort to render its massive presence invisible” (1999: 261). He continues:

“the ideal form of ideology of this global capitalism is multiculturalism, the attitude which, from a kind of empty global position, treats each local culture as the colonizer treats colonized people – as ‘natives’ whose mores are to be carefully studied and ‘respected’ ... So we are fighting our PC battles for the rights of ethnic minorities, of gays and lesbians, of different lifestyles, and so forth, while capitalism pursues its triumphant march” (1999: 258, 261).

Trans testimonies of especially marginalized communities, related to this interpretation, can enjoy commercial success or counter-hegemonic subversion, but not both. The Transgender Voice permitted into the mainstream and popular within it, accordingly, is an ideologically permissible one. Yet unlike the high production costs of cinema, literary testimonies appear to be more democratically available to different scales of production too, allowing in turn for a greater diversity of ideological perspectives and experiences. Small publishing houses with niche areas of focus such as the QTPOC-focused Biyuti Press exist in North America with degrees of sustainability that a QTPOC film industry arguably cannot, in order to disseminate the narratives of socio-economically disadvantaged trans and queer people of colour, as in the case of Lovemme Corazon later in this section. Self-publishing, including online, also provides opportunities, although the labour involved, as well as the financial return, is often distressingly unrewarding. As Jamie Berrout says in relation to her own experience as a writer and editor involved in a collective of trans writers of colour in North America,

“Consider the fact that two of our editors have had to crowdfund our survival during these past 2.5 years. The fact that more than a handful of our writers have had to do the same, have lacked safe employment and housing access to health care, among other essential things. That calling out for assistance online has simply been the most visible, published sign of the myriad crises we are faced with in our everyday lives” (2017a: 12).

Mainstream publishing, Berrout says, fosters a climate that calls only for “bland, neoliberal, faux-universal narratives of cishetero POC life” (12). Berrout’s observation appears to address the concern expressed by Dan Irving on the need to analyse “the ways

in which hegemonic capitalism's socioeconomic and political relations are reproduced vis-à-vis the transsexual body" (2013: 16). Irving identifies the compromise demanded of the Transgender Voice in published testimonies:

"Much like modern gay and lesbian movements that have veered away from liberationist approaches toward assimilatory goals, transsexuals have overwhelmingly responded to pathologization and erasure by cultivating social subjectivities that demonstrate their ability to contribute to economic progress. However, claims to self-sufficiency, morality, and a positive work ethic undermine the potential for a politics of resistance and create fractures within transsexual communities based on class, race, citizenship status, and ability (to name a few)" (2013: 27).

In alignment with Irving's critique, we see the material conditions of those like Berrout who defiantly embody a "politics of resistance." The cost can, as is evident in the accounts by Berrout, appear to veer closely at times to self-destruction, even with the support of a collective.

The scope of variability of Transgender Voices appears therefore to depend upon how closely the testimony aligns with the mainstream-friendly narratives that conform to what Berrout calls "bland, neoliberal, faux-universal narratives of cishetero POC life." Yet given the almost total occlusion from mainstream publishing of the voices of trans women of colour from the Anglophone Global North until the second decade of the twenty-first century, their voices are also more vitally in need of analysis than ever, not least for white-centred LGBT+ movements to broaden their awareness of actual trans lives. The twentieth-century transgender voices permitted into the mainstream,

characterized by the autobiographies of Lili Elbe, Christine Jorgenson, and Jan Morris, are, furthermore, as Aren Aizura says, no longer reflective of trans discourse: “Aside from the Caitlyn Jenner cottage industry, it is clear that lately the white, middle-class transsexual memoir has largely been abandoned in the public imaginary” (89). Yet Aizura correctly warns that the conditions that enable new narratives and new voices to emerge maintain ideological gatekeeping, fostered partly by commercial interests and the cisgender-majority audiences of the Anglophone Global North. He notes, “the recent focus on trans women of color in trans cultural representations evidences a historical shift toward neoliberal multiculturalism, in which trans people of color are championed as representatives of institutional diversity and required to perform more labor as such” (90).

In highlighting like Žižek a carefully accommodated version of ‘multiculturalism’ within neoliberalism, Aizura nevertheless values the importance of trans narratives in ways that Žižek does not. Specifically, Aizura identifies Janet Mock via her memoir *Redefining Realness*, and who both navigates mainstream acceptance with personalized narratives aligning to the lifestyle industry of chat-show interviews and magazine stories, while assimilating into these narratives confessions of encounters with white supremacy and forms of institutional violence. In effect, her *Trans Voice* incorporate multiplicity, involving encounters with transphobia, with poverty and inequality, and with racism. Mock’s work, via her memoirs *Redefining Realness* (2014c) and follow-up *Surpassing Certainty* (2018), leave an especially explicit personal statement and testimony to analyse. Meanwhile, the less commercially recognized – in fact, now out of print – memoir by Lovemme Corazon, namely *Trauma Queen*, complements with its own

distinctively subversive trans testimony that provides an additional, more non-binary-centred, and Internet-centred teenage account that can be said to represent a counter-hegemonic discourse. Together, these texts represent a range of testimonies available by different degrees to mainstream audiences in the Anglophone Global North that diversify our understanding of trans female lives as well as the type of neoliberal society we inhabit.

Janet Mock in *Redefining Realness*

Introduction: Janet Mock using her personal testimony via various platforms to normalize and legitimize trans women of colour in the public consciousness

As noted by Anastasia, the Transgender Voice has historically been invoked as “a necessary strategy to combat logics of pathologization” (2014: 262). Similarly in his analysis of an assimilation between neoliberalism and trans identity, Irving notes how “the normative potential of transsexuality has been a successful strategy to counter the marginalizing effects of pathologization” (2013: 26). This historical battle for legitimacy is not to be underestimated given the stigma trans women continue to face, not least given the high rates of violence encountered especially in the U.S.A.. Janet Mock’s activism via her media work and the two memoirs published between 2014 and 2018, *Redefining Realness* and *Surpassing Certainty*, is an example of a trans woman of colour using her particular skill-set to make a contribution against the stigma and threat.

To take her testimony in what Aizura identifies as the culturally significant *Redefining Realness* as a source of textual evidence, Mock’s Voice contributes to the de-pathologizing and de-stigmatizing of trans identity overall, as well as in relation to women of colour. As the cinematic treatments of *The Danish Girl* and *Girl* indicate, the most palatable idea of woman and femininity in the Anglophone Global North continues to be centred in a demure, heteronormative, middle-class whiteness, or as noted by Emily Skidmore in her study of the ‘Good transsexual’ of the 1950s, the white woman “as

chaste, moral, and refined” (2011: 293). Conversely, black and brown women in the Anglophone Global North have contended with a historic de-legitimization, with negative stereotypes including in relation to the economy as well as racially gendered ideals. As Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe highlight in their research of the experiences of British black and brown women in the twentieth century, “our relationship with the Welfare State is presented as parasitic. We are described by the media as ‘scroungers’ and depicted as having a child-like dependence upon a benevolent caring (white) society” (2018: 111). The suspicious, white-centred association of black and brown women with welfare resonates with stereotypes in the U.S.A. too, as invocations of ‘welfare queens’ attests. Bryce Covert says,

“As Ronald Reagan and other politicians ginned up anti-government and anti-poor resentment in the 1970s and ‘80s, the welfare queen stood in for the idea that black people were too lazy to work, instead relying on public benefits to get by ... She was promiscuous, having as many children as possible in order to beef up her benefit take. It was always a myth – white people have always made up the majority of those receiving government checks, and if anything, benefits are too miserly, not too lavish. But it was a potent stereotype, which helped fuel a crackdown on the poor and a huge reduction in their benefits, and it remains powerful today ... It courses through President Trump’s rhetoric as he’s pushed for work requirements in a variety of public programs” (Covert, 2019).

Yet another stereotype applicable to both the U.S. and the U.K. involves gender norms and ideals, as Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe say, “The widely-held assumption that Black women are aggressive, erratic and emotionally unstable forms the basis of a range of

damning stereotypes, on which people rely to interpret our responses” (118-119). In alignment with this analysis is the insight by British trans femme of colour Travis Alabanza, who says, “To think it is only trans people that are misgendered is the whitest way to think about bodies. Black bodies have known what it means to be de-gendered, hyper-gendered, misgendered since the beginning of your slavery” (2018: 31). The violent implications of such gendering of black and brown women and femmes in the Anglophone Global North are highlighted by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. She says of the situation in the U.S.A., “It is hardly even newsworthy when Black women, including Black transwomen, are killed or violated by law enforcement – because they are generally seen as less feminine or vulnerable” (2016: 164). Analyses and testimonies such as these underscore how the process of de-pathologizing and de-stigmatizing trans women since the 1990s must be qualified, in recognition of how the media-focused, high-profile trans women in the Anglophone Global North have tended to be white with the appearance of being financially resourced, from Caroline Cossey and Kate Bornstein to Lana Wachowski and Caitlyn Jenner. Trans women of colour, contending multiple forms of de-legitimizing, have lacked the same type of sympathetic profile that can address the grouping of the specific stigmatizations they face. In *Redefining Realness*, Mock can be said to address this gap in her own life,

“I know intimately what it feels like to crave representation and validation, to see your life reflected in someone who speaks deeply to whom you know yourself to be, echoes your reality, and instills you with possibility. That mirror wasn’t accessible to me growing up. It was an utterly lonely place to be” (2014c: xvi).

In turn, Mock's use of various media tools to develop her brand as a glamorous, high-achieving cis-passing trans woman of colour arguably *is* her activism, to be the prestigious and respectable TWOC role model she never had. Towards the end of the article in *The Guardian* promoting Mock's co-written TV show *Pose*, the interviewer Simon Hattenstone relays Mock's reflection on the impact of her memoirs, "This is who she has written her books for, she says – the next generation. Mock says she has done her bit: she can now go off and write screenplays and be a boring old binary trans woman" (Hattenstone, 2018). Her biographical brand and commercial success therefore represents and informs her activism: by being a high-profile trans woman of colour, she is normalizing the possibility of her achievements for others, including within communities of colour that might view its trans members with hostility. Aiding this process is the representational impact of the co-written TV show *Pose*, as Mock says in the same interview, "That five black and brown trans women will be the centre of a show on a network drama in primetime is huge. And they're going to be on billboards. It's *amazing* this is going to exist in the world."

The attempt to contribute to a more legitimate type of representation in the twenty-first century by Mock, therefore, can be seen as part of a historical re-address of enduring negative perceptions in the Anglophone Global North towards both women of colour generally and trans women of colour specifically. While Mock herself is careful to mediate the suggestion of being a role model, it is evident from the various claims made in the interview with *The Guardian* that she is presenting herself through various media as an affirmative public figure for trans women of colour. In a separate interview with Nia King, Mock again articulates a carefully constructed position that reveals a consistent

brand. She says, “I never say that I’m a role model, but someone may see me as one, so I want to make sure that my values and ethics align across all of my platforms, whether it’s Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, or my blog” (2014b: 199). The function of the memoirs *Redefining Realness* and *Surpassing Certainty* in producing a media-friendly narrative, emphasizing a consistent set of “values and ethics” across a series of social media platforms, however, also to a degree conforms to Taylor’s analysis of neoliberal-friendly complicity:

“When social and economic crises are reduced to issues of culture and morality, programmatic or fiscal solutions are never enough; the solutions require personal transformation ... All that remains is an overwhelming focus on charity and role modelling to demonstrate good behaviour to bad Black youngsters as opposed to offering money and resources” (2016: 48).

Taylor’s overview here is not comprehensively reflective of Mock’s activism, to be clear. Mock, for example, does not cast economically disadvantaged members of black communities as “bad Black youngsters” nor does she identify the source of poverty as an individual weakness. Mock for example in one interview mentions such issues,

“If I spoke out every single time someone said, called me out of my name, or labeled me as something that I’m not, I would not have time to advocate for the fierce and urgent issues in my community. Issues of poverty and joblessness, of a lack of healthcare, of violence, verbal and physical violence, against trans women” (2014a: 1.00).

Yet even as she mentions such issues of social justice here, Mock never appears to take the next step in discussing the kind of structural critiques and solutions that would

alleviate them. In turn, by failing to articulate any meaningfully substantial solution to issues such as poverty, it is difficult to see what Mock is advocating beyond being a role model. In this respect, Mock replicates the inoffensive, apolitical tone of white trans activist Sarah McBride, who recounts in her own memoir *Tomorrow Will Be Better* the value of being an affirmative role model in an encounter with a young trans person apparently inspired by her example. “It was life-changing for her,” says McBride, “to see a beautiful, accomplished, intelligent role-model with whom she can identify” (2018: 253). Mock similarly is inserting into the public consciousness a trans role model for other trans people to be proud of.

Unlike McBride, however, Mock does on occasion indicate an awareness of the limits of her role model status in enacting change. In a key passage in *Redefining Realness*, Mock analyses the media’s utilization of her acceptability to define trans female identity on its own ideological terms, in a way that occludes the realities for many trans women of colour and the structural poverty they face. She says,

“I have been held up consistently as a token, as the ‘right’ kind of trans woman (educated, able-bodied, attractive, articulate, heteronormative). It promotes the delusion that because I ‘made it,’ that level of success is easily accessible to all young trans women. Let’s be clear: It is not” (xvii).

Mock’s awareness here of the limits of being a respectable, prestigious role model is analysed at a broader level by Naomi Klein. Discussing the concept of “trickle-down identity politics,” Klein highlights how the narrative of a single success-story from a traditionally disempowered group can be manipulated to justify no further need to

address the structural inequalities faced by that group. Klein describes the ideological process,

“tweak the system just enough to change the genders, colors, and sexual orientation of some of the people at the top, and wait for the justice to trickle down to everyone else. And it turns out that trickle-down works about as well in the identity sphere as it does in the economic one ... In the United States, the significant gains made for greater diversity and inclusion at the top in recent years have occurred at a time of mass deportations of immigrants, and as the wealth gap between Black and white Americans actually increased” (2017: 92-93).

What Klein and Mock collectively share is the recognition of the limits of the neoliberal narrative of individual success, whether for Klein in the form of a potential female President such as Hillary Clinton or as Mock says as a respectable, glamorous, and upwardly mobile trans woman of colour. We return in effect to the warning by Irving, among others, of “the ways in which hegemonic capitalism’s socioeconomic and political relations are reproduced vis-à-vis the transsexual body” (16). Mock’s value as a role model to trans women of colour can be read therefore as both helpful in legitimizing trans women of colour, while also helping in consolidating, or at least un-challenging, a complex system that undermines the lives of many trans women of colour. Analysing her impact is therefore an exercise in multiplicity: acknowledging the importance of her being a TWOC role model in a historic sense, but also its limitations at a structural level of change.

The Trans Voice of Janet Mock (1): Mock as a product of matriarchy and local communities of colour, not ‘trans ideology’

Apart from her value as a TWOC role model, arguably the most positive legacy of Mock’s celebrity is the diverse make-up of her identity, divorced from white-centred discourses including those that attempt to de-legitimize trans identity as an implicitly ethnocentric and monolithic construction. At the broader level, this includes Rosi Braidotti, whose often contradictory analysis ultimately dismisses trans identity as a “masquerade” in contrast to the realness of cisgender identity (2002). For Braidotti, trans female identity is a product of neoliberal commodification, in her words, “a delusion” (2008). A similar verdict comes from Slavoj Žižek, who dismisses trans identity as equivalent to a commodified, postmodern form of “masturbation” in contrast to the universality of heteronormative identity (2008). Finally, and most specifically on the issue of actual trans testimonies, Bernice Hausman’s analysis concludes that trans female subjectivity is founded on the white trans biographies of the twentieth century (1995).

Contradicting the analyses of each of these theorists, *Redefining Realness* as Mock’s most significant and critically lauded testimony can be said to represent the complex interplay between Mock’s transness and her distinct life experience including in relation to her economically disadvantaged upbringing. Having grown up initially in Dallas, Texas, and Oakland, California when living with her father, she then moves as a young adolescent to Hawaii along with her siblings to live with her mother. The relative precariousness of these situations is epitomized by her father’s recreational use, and possible addiction, to crack cocaine (2014c: 52-55), as well as her mother’s apparently

similar drug-based dependency (150). Mock charts the gradual development of her own gender identity over these first decades of her life, taking form within the transgender culture of Hawaii and the indigenous *Mahu* identity (101-102). The postmodern narrative espoused by Braidotti and Žižek, which ties trans identity to an implicitly ethnocentric and Euro-U.S.-centric late-capitalist commodification as well as a unified ideology, is at odds with Mock's own multicultural gender identity. Hers is one owing to a historically Pacific island-based trans discourse, as well as Mock's own sense of gender dysphoria, described as being there since early childhood.

Mock's relationship to a Hawaiian *Mahu* identity underscores the complexity of her transgender subjectivity. In an apparent criticism of Mock's ambiguity on the issue, Kalaniopua Young asks, "Why does journalist, activist, and TV personality Janet Mock – a fierce black Native Hawaiian role model of trans-survival politics in the mainstream – not self-identify as *mahu*?" (2017: 329). Yet Mock has defended the nature of multiplicity in her identity, stating, "I've since learned that I can be both black and native Hawaiian despite others' perception and their assertion that I must choose one over the other" (2014b: 96). In development of the idea of multiple cultural systems at play, Mock can be said to typify not a single, coherent dogma or ideology belonging to a single identity but the complexity of "transculturation," the idea by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz "of a new culture by hybridization and syncretisation of discrepant and diverse cultures" (Jacobs, 2011: 119). With this conception of transculturation reflecting the overlapping dynamic of identities in relation to Mock's own subjectivity, the idea of a coherent and monolithic transgender dogma or ideology applicable generally to transgender people appears reductive as well as ethnocentric.

Also in contrast to the critique that trans identity is an expression of unstable commodification, Mock's subjectivity hardly encompasses an infinite number of options, but is entrenched in particular interconnected models to which she refers. Mock says,

“For my brother, Dad was an all-knowing hero who could do nothing wrong. That was how I felt about Mom. But as with the heroes of childhood, you realize they're make-believe characters, and the qualities you so admired in them were magnified through your obstructed lens of adoration” (2014b: 53).

The adjustment of the Oedipal-shaped cisheteropatriarchal structure in this utterance, in which the cisgender son takes after the father and the transgender daughter after the mother, is evident even as Mock acknowledges its ultimately illusory nature. To the degree it exists, the liminality of Oedipal-formed cisheteropatriarchy is also noticeable, not least given the significance of extended family, an element ignored in the Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalysis espoused by Žižek in his critique of trans identity but clearly integral here. Mock in particular appears to admire her grandmother and aunts, who “were an exhibition in resilience and resourcefulness and black womanhood ... They were pleasure-seeking, resourceful, sexy, rhythmic, nurturing, fly, happy, stylish, rambunctious, gossipy, feeling, hurt, unapologetic women. They were the kind of women I wanted to be” (65-66).

Such utterances confirm how Mock's transgender aspiration appears to come not from a commodified trans lifestyle or a transgender dogma but rather from identification with the women in her family, suggesting the defining structure that Mock gravitates to in her adolescence is not patriarchal, but an informal and amorphous matriarchy. Beyond her immediate company, the role models whom Mock admires and wishes to resemble to

at least some degree are overwhelmingly not transgender but accomplished cisgender women of colour, for example the pop singers Beyoncé and, in particular, Janet Jackson (2014c: 193, 143), whose first name Mock adopts as her own. Mock also cites a wide array of female intellectuals and writers of colour whom she admires such as Zadie Smith (8), Audre Lorde (172), and Maya Angelou (193), as well as fictional TV characters from *The Cosby Show* Clare Huxtable (37) and from white middle-class popular culture, Carrie Bradshaw from *Sex and the City* (7). In terms of trans and queer identity, Mock cites the high-profile drag queen Ru Paul and the drag queens and trans sex workers Mock sees in Hawaii (114). Partly, this invoking of a diverse range of mainly cisgender influences reflects the complexity of Mock's subjectivity, not only as transgender but also as a broader subject. It also indicates the absence of transgender models that Mock can identify with, another problematic issue with the assertions by Žižek and Hausman especially of a homogenous trans subjectivity.

On the subject of homogeneity, what is particularly noteworthy in *Redefining Realness* is the absence of any reference to the white-dominated transgender canon of autobiographies that some white, millennial trans women refer to in their autobiographies, and which Hausman claims is a pervasive influence on transsexual female subjectivity. In an ethnocentric critique that unravels particularly badly in the twenty-first century when the diversity of trans female experience becomes especially evident via numerous forms of media, Hausman says,

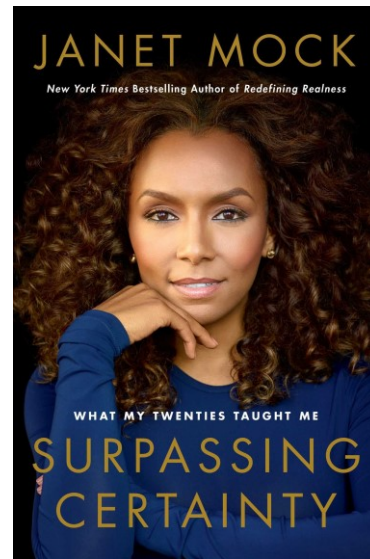
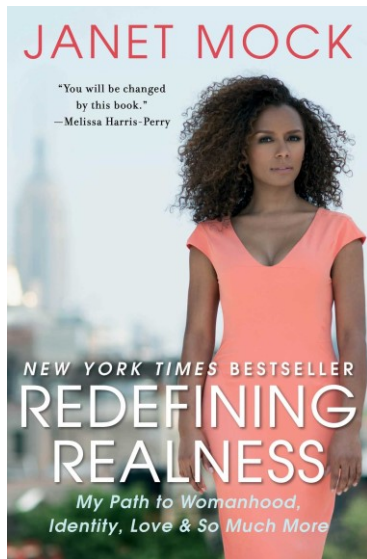
“The autobiographical texts help institute a certain discursive hegemony within a community whose members have a substantial investment in mimicking the enunciative modality of those who been successful in achieving sex

transformation. Collecting the autobiographies of successful transsexuals – either through personal contact or by print media – constitutes an important part of transsexual self-construction, self-education, and self-preparation for encounters with clinic personnel” (1995: 143).

As we see in Mock’s writing, there is a noticeable absence of references to both historic and contemporary high-profile trans female names such as Lili Elbe, Kate Bornstein and Julia Serano, as made in the autobiographies of white trans women in the U.K. and U.S.A. Juliet Jacques (2015) and Laura Jane Grace (2017). Christine Jorgenson is briefly referred to by Mock only to highlight the dominance of whiteness in mainstream trans representations (255). Consistently the defining identity for Janet Mock is not transgender, but female and black, with the occasional reference to class.

What Mock also reveals in terms of her transness is how her subjectivity is simultaneously more stable and complex than the claims made by theorists relating to postmodern, gender-nonconforming identities. *Redefining Realness* reveals a narrative entrenched in black and Hawaiian communities, with the recurring adoption of particular women of colour within matriarchal settings as figures to identify with. Several years since the book’s publication, and Mock has developed as a critically acclaimed screenwriter, but also continues to be the transgender woman of colour of her aspirations since adolescence. Mock’s sense of isolation, when it happens either at home (38-39), or at school (147-149), appears to occur because of the inadequacy of her surroundings to cater to her identity, not because she herself either desires isolation or is unable to connect with her communities.

The Trans Gaze of Janet Mock: the invisible analgesic of curated, neoliberal storytelling, as embodied by the packaging of Mock’s two memoirs



On the concept of neoliberal-friendly, curated storytelling that Janet Mock’s personal brand arguably embodies, Sujatha Fernandes discusses the “Paradox of Participation,” in which, “During the late 1990s and new millennium, ‘telling one’s story’ became linked to discourses of participation, empowerment, and social capital” (31). The paradox emerges as it offers “a sense of meaning to citizens at the same time as it limited avenues through which citizens could act.” Fernandes provides examples in her analysis of such paradoxes such as the talkshow, the kind of media format in which Mock frequently appears on U.S. television. Fernandes says, “Talk shows avoided a critique of racism, economic inequality, and patriarchy; rather, the therapeutic discourse comes to dominate over broader social critique” (22). Visibility, in other words, comes at a cost:

one can be seen, but not heard. The Transgender Voice on these formats is funny, quick-witted, and humane, but also anodyne, inoffensive and banal. Its effect is analgesic, comforting, and harmless to the majoritarian audience, and is prohibited from being anything more. It embodies, if it does not openly express, in the words of Fernandes, “principles of upward mobility, entrepreneurship, and self-reliance.” As with her regular talkshow appearances, Mock’s two memoirs exemplify this act of an uplifting individualistic narrative.

A deconstruction of the covers of Mock’s memoirs reveals the dynamic of curated personal stories at play, both with *Redefining Realness* (2014), which focuses mainly on Mock’s childhood and adolescence, and *Surpassing Certainty* (2018), which concentrates on her career and romantic experiences in her twenties. At this surface level, we also see a potential divergence with the acknowledgment within Trans Studies of the value of Mock’s testimonies as providing a different kind of transgender voice. Aizura for example recognizes *Redefining Realness* as part of,

“the enormous groundswell of transgender cultural production in the 2010s – novels, poetry, experimental music, dance, experimental and feature film, and all kinds of other genres of self-expression ... [which speak out] against violence toward trans women of color by individuals, police, courts, and the prison-industrial complex” (89).

By contributing to the broadening of trans discourse towards addressing counter-hegemonic ideologies, Mock’s first memoir especially is evidently regarded as challenging the “understanding [of] transsexuality as an ahistorical or biological phenomenon [that] elides the racial and colonial underpinnings of transsexuality”

(Aizura, 66). Yet at the surface level at least, Mock's testimonies are mainstream vehicles that diversify a societal base of knowledge about transsexuality. Specifically, the professionally respectable and commercially intended covers of the testimonies appear designed to show how trans women – including trans women of colour – are like other women, namely cisgender women, and therefore figures deserving of empathy and sympathy. The texts' commercial designation are typified by their mainstream publishing house Simon and Schuster, and the featuring of a recognized statement of commercial popularity, *New York Times Bestseller*. The stylization meets that of the conventions of mainstream memoir too. Both covers maintain a professionally stylized continuity in terms of font. Mock's name is placed at the top and the title at the bottom. A glamorous photo image captures Mock's striking, cis-passing beauty, as articulated by *The Guardian* journalist's Simon Hattenstone who describes Mock in his interview with her as "gorgeous – tall, curvy, with brown, almond-shaped eyes, a perfect smile and cheekbones so high you could hoist a flag on them" (Hattenstone, 2018). Mock's cis-passing 'beauty privilege' is clearly harnessed for the benefit of the books' promotion.

The wording on the cover of *Redefining Realness* further indicates to the potential, browsing consumer the individualistic, apolitical, and therefore non-threatening tone and themes of Mock's textual focus. The emphasis on linearity, progression, and self-actualization, as well as romance, are evident in the subheading, '*My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More.*' A similar thematic signification is evident on the cover of *Surpassing Certainty* and its subheading '*What My Twenties Taught Me.*' The emphasis is again on the personal, in this respect her personal learning curve. Supporting quotations on the cover of both books underpin the idea of personal

transformation and accompanying resilience. For *Redefining Realness*, it comes from a writer and media personality highlighting how the focus is on individual, rather than social, transformation: “You will be changed by this book.” For *Surpassing Certainty*, the quote from a journal claims the book to be “A defining chronicle of strength and spirit.” On the back, similar quotes align with the blurbs to emphasize how the texts respectively serve as a “powerful vision of possibility and self-realization” (2014c) and “an ode to being young, hungry, and messy, offering timely glimpse about the barriers many face – and a much-needed guide on how to make a way out of no way” (2018). Collectively, the covers and blurbs prepare the reader for a Cinderella narrative of an individual overcoming poverty, racism, and gender dysphoria to become highly successful as a media figure and trans celebrity. Indicating the universal message of the cover, there is even the suggestion that the reader too can find solutions “on how to make a way out of no way,” similar to benefiting from a self-help book.

Simultaneously, the packaging indicates the kind of neoliberal ideology identified variously by Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade, in which, “The United States loves its heroes and its narratives – Horatio Alger, rags-to-riches, ‘pull yourself up by your bootstraps,’ streets ‘paved with gold,’ the rugged frontiersman, the benevolent philanthropist, and Obama as savior, among others” (659). At this surface-level too, Berrout’s critical observation has resonance, of mainstream publishing allowing only “bland, neoliberal, faux-universal narratives of cishetero POC life.” Mock’s “journey of self-discovery,” to quote from a couple of the reviews on the back of *Redefining Realness* and their address to the potential readership, “is not all that different from yours or mine,” as well as “a call-to-arms for other women to embrace the beauty inside them whatever

their circumstances.” With these parameters of universality established, the texts appear designed to appeal to cisgender-majority and mainly female audiences in the Anglophone Global North. We see the feel-good boundaries in which Mock’s testimonies must take form, where there appears little room for counter-hegemonic discourses.

The conventionality of Mock’s memoirs, as suggested at the surface level of cover and back, appears to conform to the respective analyses by Irving and Anastasia as “a necessary strategy to combat logics of pathologization.” Mock’s *Voice and Gaze*, as manifested in her testimonies, in this sense represent a slick and attractive counter-narrative that presents trans women as not only normal, but impressive examples of happy, upwardly-mobile citizenry. If the two memoirs go no further than assimilation into mainstream culture, they nevertheless subvert historical hegemonic narratives about the pathologized nature of trans female identity. Furthermore, Mock’s testimonies can be said to diversify what Aizura sees as the “understanding [of] transsexuality as an ahistorical or biological phenomenon [that] elides the racial and colonial underpinnings of transsexuality” (66). With these testimonies, Mock is proof that transness exists beyond the white, middle-class model but that ultimately, to be successful, the white, middle-class model may remain the destination of acceptability for those seeking mainstream respectability.

The Trans Voice of Janet Mock (2): Community advocate and Clintonian neoliberal

In relation to the neoliberal society in which she lives and thrives, Mock’s politics can be understood via a range of texts, from her two memoirs *Redefining Realness* and

Surpassing Certainty but also in particular interviews in which her position is sought. In this respect, we see the thematic limits of Mock's memoirs, which prioritize the detailing of personal experience over the advocating of political ideas. As Fernandes says in a passage with overtones of Mock's own life, this "curated storytelling" is

"a means of producing subjects who are guided by these principles of upward mobility, entrepreneurship, and self-reliance. They enter into a path of enlightenment and self-knowledge through the choices they make at key moments. Those who participate in this self-making often have aspirations of class mobility, due to their educational opportunities, niche position in the economy, or access to structures of funding" (2017: 11).

Significantly, the effect of this form of curated, neoliberal storytelling, as Fernandes says, are "personal stories [that] shift the focus away from structurally defined axes of oppression and help to defuse the confrontational politics of social movements" (2). In analysing her political position overall, this section deconstructs Mock's "curated storytelling" to underscore the nature of mainstream gatekeeping: that Mock's high-profile visibility and her ability to be a mainstream figure are connected to her implicitly neoliberal views.

On Mock's suitability for mainstream attention, we see in her two memoirs how the politics are hazily articulated. On the one hand, her self-aware analysis of the way the media focuses on feel-good narratives is discerning. As cited already, Mock highlights the gap between her own successful life and those of economically disadvantaged trans women of colour generally, indicating her success can sometimes be appropriated by the mainstream media as an illusory, feel-good symbolism, in which she is embraced as "the

‘right’ kind of trans woman (educated, able-bodied, attractive, articulate, heteronormative).” Mock’s concern about tokenism appears to underpin her vocally affirmed relationship with economically disadvantaged communities of queer and trans women of colour in the U.S.A., whom she frequently references in her interviews. She cites, for example, the trans elders, Stonewall veterans, and prison abolitionists Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, Sylvia Rivera, and Marsha P. Johnson (*BUILD Series*, 2017: 11.50), with the prison-abolitionist Griffin-Gracy in particular described as “a mentor” (9.14). In *Redefining Realness*, Mock accordingly addresses the way the media selects narratives involving social mobility when representing trans lives. She says,

“race and class are not usually discussed in these positive media portraits, which go as far as erasing the presence of trans youth from low-income communities and/or communities of color ... best-case scenarios are not the reality for most trans people, regardless of age” (119).

Mock’s critique here of the absence of race and class in mainstream media representations does not, however, preclude the limits of her own perspective or pronouncements, which similarly exclude critiques of structures and systems that disempower and racialize particular groups. Mock instead appears to challenge media exposure as the impediment on the lives of trans women of colour. Mock develops this position by referring to the power of narrative, and by suggesting that a more diverse range of positive media stories about trans women of colour would help to address the inequality of opportunity. On this power, George Monbiot agrees on how “We all possess a narrative instinct: an innate disposition to listen for an account of who we are and where

we stand” (2018: 2). On the success of neoliberal narratives, Monbiot also echoes the position of Bassichis, et al. He notes how,

“Competition and individualism are the values at the heart of the twenty-first century’s secular religion ... This story is supported by a rich mythology of rugged individualism, and advanced through an inspiring lexicon of lone rangers, sole traders, self-starters, self-made men and women, going it alone” (20).

Yet on the political power of individualized narratives, in an echo of Klein’s conception of “trickle-down identity politics,” Fernandes warns of the limits of personal storytelling as a form of inspiration,

“this claim of invisible and silenced people gaining a voice through stories is itself a rhetorical construction that amplifies some voices at the expense of others. Those who are able to make their personal experiences legible to the mainstream through drawing on dominant narratives and devices are given a platform while other voices are silenced” (2017: 5).

In turn, Mock’s belief in the power of her personal narrative, with its function of consciousness-raising and inspiration for some, and education for others, may be seen for its relatively limited impact at a structural level. Attempting to define a position around the importance of narrative, Mock says,

“We must also deconstruct these stories and contextualize them and shed a light on the many barriers that face trans women, specifically those of color, and those from low-income communities, who aim to reach the not-so-extraordinary things I have grasped: living freely and without threat or notice as I am, making a safe, healthy living, and finding love” (2014c: xvii).

In this excerpt in *Redefining Realness*, it is unclear how the desire for more diverse media representation would help economically disadvantaged trans women of colour at a material level, or whether material improvement is really the aim. On the goals of “living freely and without threat,” there is the open-ended allusion to either awareness-raising in the larger community or the enactment of hate crime legislation, while with “safe, healthy living,” improved healthcare might appear to be a solution. Yet given the complex and highly politicized issue of universal healthcare in the U.S.A., in a country where at the time of writing approximately 30 million U.S. citizens, or 9.2% of the U.S. population, lack basic healthcare (Broaddus & Aron-Dine, 2020), Mock’s consistent failure to articulate with any detail what the solutions would be, in its reticence, appears performative, if not calculatingly vague. We return, therefore, to Taylor’s analysis, not only of “role-modelling” as an unconvincing solution but also of revealing a visible gap between those who are thriving within neoliberal capitalism and those who are not, including within Black communities. Taylor notes,

“There is growing polarization between the Black political and economic elite and those ... referred to as experiencing a social condition of “disposability ... [the elites] experience racial inequality differently compared to poor and working-class African Americans and draw different conclusions about what these experiences mean” (16, 7).

Whether or not Mock, via her upward mobility and escape out of poverty, represents a Voice within the “Black political and economic elite,” it is difficult, at any rate, to know what it is that Mock is advocating, in contrast to the highly detailed descriptions used for her personal story. The positive outcome Mock desires for trans

women of colour is not specifically related to particular structurally-identified improvements to the socio-economic system, but to a vaguely articulated pursuit of happiness. In effect, we see another alignment with the mode of the Clintonian ideology of Sarah McBride, who states as an aim of her activism an individual-focused aspiration for the good life and the fulfillment of the American Dream:

“We strive toward a world where every person can live their life to the fullest.

While the progress is uneven and can come in fits and starts, I still know today ... that, with hard work and compassion, we can make more tomorrows better than today” (2018: 8).

In effect, and with the ‘American Dream’ treated as a realizable goal, a vaguely expressed wish for leveling up is advocated with a simplistic causal reasoning: if a particular disempowered minority is given adequate visibility and with it rights and protections, the conditions then allow the members of that minority to flourish. Yet there is much to be sceptical about with such a position, given the systemic poverty experienced by people in neoliberal societies, including not only by people of colour. Writing on Black liberation, Taylor firstly highlights the seriousness and the structural oppressions that destroy the lives of economically disadvantaged black and brown Americans, particular the issue of policing and the prison industrial complex. Taylor says,

“the consequences of policing include hundreds of deaths, hundreds of thousands of arrests, and millions of ruined futures when interactions with law enforcement lead to unemployment, criminal records that create chronic unemployability, and

all of the social disorder that follows as a result. It is not surprising, then, that policing is always a focal point of Black social protest” (133).

With the failure to acknowledge how the central impact of policing and carceral justice in the U.S.A. disproportionately targets Black communities, Mock is effectively ignoring a primary, meaningful cause of the poverty and destruction of black and brown lives in the U.S.A. In turn, it is unclear why the tendency of low wages and precarious worker rights experienced by many economically disadvantaged white people would not continue to befall a large portion of trans women of colour, irrespective of the expansion of trans rights concerning, for example, hate crime legislation or adequate healthcare. In a continuation of her structural, partly class-based critique, Taylor says,

“Just because white workers, to take a specific example, may at times fully accept reactionary ideas about African Americans does not change the objective fact that the majority of the US poor are white, the majority of people without health insurance are white, and the majority of people without health insurance are white, and the majority of the homeless are white” (214).

Contributing to the vaguely identitarian and depoliticized mode of Mock’s activism and advocacy is her critical view of the role of white-dominated LGBT+ spaces. Mock calls out such spaces for their prioritizing white, middle-class trans issues to the exclusion of the needs of socio-economically deprived trans women of colour. Mock describes her engagement there, “I was tasked with speaking out about these glaring disparities, about how those with the most access within the movement set the agenda, contribute to the skewed media portrait, and overwhelmingly fail at funnelling resources to those most marginalized” (2014c: xvii). This reference to resources and funding is the

closest Mock comes in her memoirs or seemingly elsewhere to the issue of economic redistribution. For U.S. economists and social theorists advocating radical redistributions of wealth, such as Taylor, Paul Krugman and Joseph Stieglitz, as well as the very trans elders cited by Mock as an influence on her activism, such as Griffin-Gracy, Johnson, and Rivera (Lewis, 2017: 57), large-scale economic redistribution from the rich is one of the necessary steps in improving the lives of disempowered communities. In focusing solely on LGBT+ organizations, with their relatively minor budgets and political influence, the re-distributive solution by Mock appears almost to scapegoat white-dominated LGBT+ organizations for failing to resolve structural inequalities caused by much larger trans/national systems. Mock's disinterest in structural and economic solutions, which might help QTPOC communities at a more substantive level, is most clearly articulated, however, in a TV-show interview with Ricky Camilleri, ostensibly to promote a TV show Mock is producing on trans identity. Unlike talkshow interviewers such as Oprah Winfrey, Wendy Williams, and Piers Morgan, where the dialogue is founded solely upon Mock's personal story concerning transitioning and post-transition romance and career, Camilleri deviates briefly towards politics and the economy. It is a rare example where the normally consummate TV interviewee, Mock, struggles in an interview to articulate a clear position:

RC: I think it's fascinating that 'identity politics,' trans rights, LGBTQ+ rights, have been lumped into this word 'identity politics.' As if they weren't just people fighting for their human rights. And yet, the vote that happened in the Rustbelt community [in support of Donald Trump becoming President] is not lumped into

identity politics for some reason. It's 'economics.' What do you associate that with?

JM: Well I don't know. I don't really have an answer, to try to unpack a white, patriarchal capitalistic society. I don't necessarily have 'those' pleasures, or er, those accesses that some of those folk have. But it's just this idea that 'there's only so much, and if there's any kind of progress anywhere, it's taking away from me (*BUIILD*, 2016: 15.20).

Initially, this response aligns with Camilleri's highlighting of the double standards of white identitarianism. In addition, Mock indicates a coming critique involving the concept of 'scarcity mindset,' which Heron Greenesmith describes in their analysis of trans-exclusionary feminism and its relationship with "the right's playbook, when they say, 'Let's prioritize citizens over noncitizens, let's prioritize white people over people of colour'" (Fitzsimmons, 2019). Yet Mock falls short of developing the structural critique, relying instead on a narrative of inclusivity. People of colour, she appears to suggest, only require the same privileges enjoyed by whites under neoliberalism – regardless of the issue of white poverty, incarceration, and precarious employment, healthcare and housing as noted earlier by Taylor – in order to prosper. She instead articulates a position relating to identity that replicates McBride's belief that a Hillary Clinton Presidency would have helped trans people, including economically disadvantaged QTPOC communities:

JM: You know, one of the self-evident truths that the Founders have is that all men are created equal. And we know that what they meant by 'men' was white, cisgender, straight men. They weren't talking about the rest of us. And I think that

what was interesting and vital was that, you know, Hillary Clinton's campaign was running on this sense of trying to widen that coalition. Try to widen and say that 'we're going to centre and prioritize folk who've not been centred and prioritized for so long in our politics.' And what happened is that half of the country did not vote for that America.

Mock's faith in the Presidency of Hillary Clinton as a potential source of liberation for trans communities of colour is a indicator of her limited political vision in terms of making a meaningful difference to the lives of economically disempowered TPOC communities. Monbiot for example highlights how Clinton in the 2016 election, "represented everything that had gone wrong with the Democratic Party – its dynastic self-regard, its umbilical relationship with Wall Street, its reliance on big money, its technocratic machine politics and abandonment of principle" (2018: 167). In a similarly damning analysis of Clinton's political platform and her failure in the 2016 election that also addresses Clinton's supposed support for trans rights, Naomi Klein says,

"Clinton's failure was not one of messaging but of track record. Specifically, it was the stupid economics of neoliberalism, fully embraced by her, her husband, and her party's establishment, that left Clinton without a credible offer to make ... if there was a problem with her focus on gender, sexuality, and racial identity, it was that Clinton's brand of identity politics does not challenge the system that produced and entrenched these inequalities, but seeks only to make that system more 'inclusive.' So, yes to marriage equality and abortion access and transgender bathrooms, but forget about the right to housing, the right to a wage that supports a family (Clinton resisted the calls for a \$15 minimum wage), the universal right

to free health care, or anything else that requires serious redistribution of wealth from top to bottom and would mean challenging the neoliberal playbook” (2017: 91-92).

What is perhaps most striking and poignant about Mock’s belief in the transformative impact of Clinton’s neoliberal politics is its implication for her own experience, given Clinton’s vilification of the users of crack cocaine among African-American communities in the 1990s. It is Clinton, for example, who in the 1990s contributed to the dehumanization of such addicts by referring to them as “superpredators” as part of a political framing that led a surge in the mass incarceration of African Americans for drug-related crime. As noted by Taylor, “By the end of [Bill] Clinton’s term [in 2000], Black incarceration rates had tripled and the United States was locking up a larger proportion of its population than any other country on earth” (102). In a speech that bestializes those within communities of colour for their interaction with crack cocaine, Hillary Clinton says,

“Just as in a previous generation we had an organized effort against the mob. We need to take these people on. They are often connected to big drug cartels, they are not just gangs of kids anymore. They are often the kinds of kids that are called superpredators – no conscience, no empathy. We can talk about why they ended up that way, but first, we have to bring them to heel” (Graves, 2016).

In contrast to Clinton’s dehumanization of users of cocaine in the black and brown community in the U.S., and the relationship to what Mock herself calls the crack cocaine epidemic in *Redefining Realness*, Mock describes with nuance her relationship growing up with her father. He appears simultaneously to have been addicted to crack

cocaine while also being an important positive influence on Mock by supplementing her schooling with additional tutoring. It reveals a complex and humane reality that the Clinton-Democrat fearmongering against communities of people of colour in relation to drugs never articulated. Mock narrates one particularly tender childhood scene between her and her father:

“‘You always gotta be a step ahead,’ he would say to me with a wink after explaining long division when my class was just learning basic division.

I believe Dad’s diligence with my homework was his means of bonding with me, and his coaching took me beyond the classroom’s agenda, helping me excel in school while instilling a sense of structure and discipline and confidence” (2014c: 36-37).

It is instructive that Mock’s exceptional level of academic attainment at school appears to have benefited from the study habits instilled by her father, in spite of his drug use, and which in turn leads to Mock winning a series of university scholarships, firstly in Hawaii and later at New York University in journalism. With this evidence, the foundations of Mock’s materially successful life are arguably founded, at least partly, on having a father around to support her, in spite of his drug dependency.

Regardless of Mock’s failure to connect Clinton’s neoliberal agenda and political past to the persecution of black and brown communities, Klein’s analysis is shared by many of the QTPOC communities of colour and their advocates that Mock also speaks for. In a roundtable discussion on radical transgender politics and activism, Yve Laris Cohen distinguishes meaningful structural changes to trans people’s lives with neoliberal politics: “I’ve found ‘radical’ useful and necessary to differentiate my antistate,

anticapitalist, abolitionist politics from those of Hillary Clinton” (2017: 332). In the same discussion, abolition activist and trans woman of colour Kalaniopua Young says in acknowledgment of Mock’s celebrity status,

“If Mock is going to be the new Oprah, I’m all for it ... [but] I know that this will not liberate ‘girls like us’ from the prisons and homeless encampments in Hawaii where Hawaiians comprise the largest segments of these populations” (2017: 330).

By these stated positions, we see the underlining of an informal gap between Mock’s claim to advocate on behalf of economically disadvantaged TPOC communities, and a shared position concerning diagnosis and solutions.

Conclusion

Janet Mock’s mode of celebrity activism arguably symbolizes a trade-off for marketable figures from disempowered minorities: one enters the mainstream on condition of ideological compatibility. This is not to say that Mock avoids using her platform to champion the causes of less empowered trans women of colour: cases such as the incarceration of CeCe McDonald and the appropriation of the work of Tourmaline on Marsha P. Johnson have been referenced in Mock’s social media output. Yet these are, like Mock’s own success, isolated and ultimately individualized cases, part of a brand that celebrates the triumph of the individual. Mock’s Gaze in this sense comes as from a posterchild for a Clintonian-hued neoliberal society in the U.S.A., one inclusive of homonormative and homonationalist models of outstanding citizenry. Her Voice too is of

carefully curated personal stories of overcoming great odds, underpinning the lucrative brand of her own exceptionalness. She is, at the same time, at the very least a role model for those looking for examples of legitimacy, in a country where such legitimacy can remain elusive.

Lovemme Corazon in *Trauma Queen*



The Transgender Gaze of Lovemme Corazon: The Malleability of Childhood / Adolescence Looking Back at the Adult Gaze

The images on the covers of Janet Mock's memoirs contain an array of significations alluding to the subject in relation to the U.S.A.'s neoliberal society. With Mock, we are presented with the photorealism of a woman of colour in her late twenties / early thirties who reassures the cisgender readership of her normativity, set to the background of that most neoliberal of settings, the city. *Trauma Queen* contains its own vivid series of messages around the memoir's author, Mexican-Athabaskan Lovemme Corazon (real name Luna Merbruja). A thick black frame is set up for the reader to peer through, with a suggestively voyeuristic perspective, at the orange and yellow of bright sunflowers that partially conceal the young person of colour looking back. Lissom-bodied, Corazon is depicted from the waist up, unclothed but for the additional sun

flowers that adorn their hair. If Mock's image can be said to conjure, with the aid of the background of a cityscape, the career-focused woman of colour transposed from the urban glamour of the writer's favourite TV show, *Sex and the City*, then Corazon's imaginary is founded more in nature and the seasons of Spring and Summer, with the suggestion of prelapsarian identity. Native American goddesses are potentially evoked that signify transformation and fertility, such as Asdzą́ą́ Nádleehé ('the woman who changes') of the Navajo, or Pachamama of the Inca. Specifically for the audience in the Anglophone Global North, the image of the topless Corazon seen only from the waist up arguably also conjures myths from Ancient Greece: the spirit-like Satyr "with horselike legs and hooves instead of feet" (Larson, 2001: 91) or their semi-female equivalents the Nymphs. The latter especially are depicted with a subversive gender, simultaneously "sexually promiscuous" (2001: 4) but also "healing deities" that occupy verdant landscapes of flowers and trees and inviting "passersby to stop and refresh themselves" (5, 9-10). The framing of Corazon, in this context, connects to another mythological Nymph-like figure redolent of transgender signification, the Nereid, or mermaid. Evoking such images, Corazon's transness is Otherworldly: magical rather than medical, wild instead of urban, natural instead of constructed, and because of these qualities, eschewing the modern for something simultaneously ancient and eternal. Jennifer Larson highlights a still more pertinent re-iteration of the nymphs and satyrs, the "supernatural beings known as (*e*)*xôtika*, 'things outside or beyond'" (62). In this vein, the (post-)teenage trans figure of Corazon, adorned in flowers, potentially represents, like the *exôtika*, "unchaste offspring, who may be a danger to the order of family and village; on the other, they represent the desires that are held in check by social strictures" (88). A tension is

captured here, perhaps, locked in the adolescent body, described by Michel Foucault and his analysis of the Victorian, psychoanalytic anxiety of childhood sexuality. In a very different way to Mock especially, these are troubling but resonant significations that draw on cultural landscapes of myths and legends as well as the spiritual, in contrast to the modern trans woman's secular embodiment. Corazon in this image grounds transness with their Gaze in the nebulous and even mystical origins of human identity, with its connections to nature and the divine.

Corazon's body too, slender and androgynous, is that of an adolescent/post-adolescent non-binary femme, and it is here that the tension intensifies. Writing on transness in relation to adolescence, Gabrielle Owen identifies the fluidity that might be unsettling to a cisgender audience:

“Adolescence constructs and reifies adulthood as the stage of life when selfhood is final, established, known. And so the idea of adolescence contains transition, movement, and change in which the perceived turbulence of puberty is loaded with meanings about the discovery of self” (2014: 22).

Corazon's image, with their Gaze, defies this reification of adulthood described by Owen. The image represents the possibilities of identity before it becomes stabilized by a demanding social conditioning, with its mores and condemnations, its conventions and taboos. If the trans female body in the twentieth-century mainstream is shaped by the white middle-class and middle-aged woman, having been evaluated and operated on, her mind pathologized by a stern, paternalistic, and judgmental medical practitioner like the infamous John Randle in the U.K. (Shopland, 2017), or Robert Stoller and John Money in the U.S.A. (Stryker and Whittle, 2006), then Corazon represents transness come alive

before these stages. It is a transness simultaneously liberated and dangerously untethered. Owen says of this threat to a cisheteropatriarchal, Oedipal culture, in which adulthood blurs dangerously into childhood, “Adolescence functions simultaneously as a site of discovery and disavowal, sustaining assumptions about what childhood was and what adulthood should be, manufacturing narrative coherence for moments of arrival, and creating distance for moments of contradiction, contingency, or change” (23).

The qualities of “contradiction, contingency, or change,” within a discourse of transgender linearity are destabilizing for trans policy-maker and cisgender critic alike. They indicate a body that is un-categorizable, legally un-regulatable, and potentially, socially un-relatable: a figure too unpredictably distinct to belong to any one community or set of characteristics. The image of the vividly-coloured flowers, capturing blossoming, flowering, and bloom, are transient and short-term, outside of the human narrative of fixed, essentialized identities, whether it be within an LGBT+ framework or the cisgendered one of Braidotti’s “irreducible and irreversible difference” (2002: 26) of the sexed human body. To such a critique, Corazon’s image can only be a temporary phase, if not a postmodern aberration. Yet Corazon’s Gaze, from behind the sunflowers, is both mischievous and confident. It asserts, even as the arms appear to clasp, perhaps in self-protection, in anticipation from the opposing Cisgender Gaze. Claudia Castañeda says of this threatening form of innocence,

“Transgender childhood becomes a threat to normative gender development and so to (normal) gender itself; if gender can shift away from the expected normal binary of male and female associated with particular bodily signs, then how can we know the gender of any child-body? And yet at the same time, because of its

presumed malleability, the child-body also becomes one that can be put back on course when it deviates from the norm” (2014: 60).

In reference to Castañeda’s analysis, a cisgender and even transgender anxiety is produced with the image on the cover of *Trauma Queen*. The nakedness adorned with, and emerging behind, flowers from a garden paradise simultaneously signifies both the transcendent and the socially untamed and is difficult to label. If Mock’s urban glamour represents the trans woman safely incorporated within the social Symbolic, then the image of Corazon skirts dangerously close to a viewer’s Lacanian Real, a place without language or certainty.

In extension of this surface signification, Corazon’s memoir in turn can be read as the exploration by its subject of language and transgender discourse as they make sense of themselves, without – at least for the duration of the subject’s adolescence in the memoir – ever needing to settle on a single idea for their past, present, and future. For this reason too, politically, the surface image and the interior text also embody the Nomad Science described by Hil Malatino as a site that embraces the “specific, resistant, and creative ways in which trans* and gender-nonconforming subjects reinvent and reconstruct themselves in manners irreducible to the medical logic of transition” (2014: 140). For Malatino this undermines a conceptual State Science that necessitates “diagnosing gender difference; they are utilized to establish dyadic essences of gender that are then codified within diagnostic criteria” (139). Corazon in the image and in the accompanying text is in this sense unrepresentative of the neoliberal-friendly conception of homonormativity as defined by Lisa Duggan (2002), in which an LGBT+ embrace of State institutions such as marriage and serving the military legitimize and normalize a

marginalized identity through an appeal to citizenry. *Trauma Queen*'s text makes no such appeal to U.S. citizenry; like the image on the cover, Corazon fails to fit the urban-based lifestyle identity characteristic of LGBT+ identities in neoliberal narratives, be it *A Fantastic Woman* or the adult life of Janet Mock as described in *Surpassing Certainty*. The idea of the nation state of the U.S.A. in its current form appears in Corazon's text not to be fit for purpose. Whereas Mock's narrative arguably typifies the framing by Sujantha Fernandes of the neoliberal "principles of upward mobility, entrepreneurship, and self-reliance," Corazon embodies in their text arguably no more than the last of these, and even here in a fragile sense, compounding the sense that theirs is a memoir that sits uneasily in a neoliberal state in the Anglophone Global North. As Fernandes says, not all narratives assimilate or acquiesce to neoliberalism's hegemony: "despite the desire for individual personal advancement, the majority of those who tell their stories are not able to improve their conditions. This is one of the contradictions that could work to unravel the project of neoliberal subject-making" (11).

In reflection of the suggestion of fluidity and indeterminacy on the cover, Corazon's memoir is a complex amalgam of genres. It characterizes to a degree Leigh Gilmore's description of a sub-category of biography wrestling with "representations of citizenship and nation" (2001: 12), yet it is mainly an admission of anomie and a subject's discomfort within a nation and society. Similarly, the text both embodies the conventional characteristics of autobiographical writing for "cathartic, confessional, or therapeutic ends" (Gilmore, 1994: 67), while also reading most convincingly as a teenage diary. It includes entries sometimes with dates, and other times without. Occasionally a letter or document is included. A two-page section reveals an attempt to write

experimentally without spaces, a creative attempt at stream of consciousness:

“I’m low income queer Latin student with poor eyesight and happier days.

I’m more than ready to commit suicide” (2013: 90).

The experimental writing and the fragmentary, inconsistent recording of the dates, along with the memoir’s title, reinforce how *Trauma Queen* is a testimony that appears primarily written with the intention of self-healing from various forms of abuse, rather than providing a historical account and personal arc. Post-publication, Corazon says of the text’s departure, “A lot of memoirs and a lot of queer books I read, they don’t really go into these deep places, you know? They don’t really go into the depths of what depression actually looks like” (2014: 84). In eschewing certain conventions expected of the transgender memoir, in relation to social assimilation, the gender binary, heteronormative sexuality, and mental health, *Trauma Queen*’s exploration of “deep places” makes it a transgender text that typifies Aizura’s reference to a new wave of trans testimonies. These have replaced “the white, middle-class transsexual memoir [from] the public imaginary,” as part of,

“the enormous groundswell of transgender cultural production in the 2010s – novels, poetry, experimental music, dance, experimental and feature film, and all kinds of other genres of self-expression ... [which speak out] against violence toward trans women of color by individuals, police, courts, and the prison-industrial complex” (2018: 89).

Yet given its alterity compared to Mock’s own meditation on her youth in *Redefining Realness*, Corazon’s text is also proof of the diversity within this new wave of these narratives too.

The Transgender Voice of Lovemme Corazon (1): Malleability of gender and sexuality

In his analysis of “the enormous groundswell of transgender cultural production in the 2010s,” Aizura warns of its place within the “historical shift toward neoliberal multiculturalism” (2018: 90). Within this new wave of trans voices, gazes and expressions, Aizura sees the potentially manipulating function “in which trans people of color are championed as representatives of institutional diversity and required to perform more labor as such.” *Trauma Queen* both performs this labour of education but with attitude: the disinterest of the writer/subject in white voices and gazes is a major message of the text, and is palpable throughout. Corazon’s Gaze on the cover appears to invite the reader’s Gaze into its space, but the accompanying Voice is arguably one of selective inclusion or, in the case of a White Gaze, a nonplussed distrust. Or as Corzon says at one point, “I look up and make eye contact with a white stranger whose eyebrows scrunch up before he looks away ... There’s that fearful curiosity again” (178).

On the memoir’s pervasive depiction of sexuality and gender, the line between trans writing and the neoliberal rhetoric of individuality may be said to overlap, but this makes the text no less remarkable for its representation in a memoir of non-binary trans identity by a young person of colour. Corazon’s reflective unwillingness to conform via their appearance to a binary-based, homonormative subjectivity, moreover, can be said to fit awkwardly with the kind of narrative celebrated on the talkshow format of lifestyle and personal journey that trans biographies typically lend themselves to. As is self-

analysed in the text, Corazon's appearance is connected to race and class against an Anglophone context, and a set of accompanying, socio-economic disadvantages they never leave behind, in antithesis to a neoliberal ideal.

On the previous taboo issue of trans writing on sex, Corazon's Voice appears to flaunt their transgression. This includes subverting the kind of Victorian prohibitions and their legacy of 1950s nuclear-family-based suburban propriety that, in turn, can be said to shape homonormative conceptions of gender in the Anglophone Global North. Writing on the dominance in the industrial-capitalist era that embraced psychiatric Freudian prescriptions of sexual normality, Michel Foucault describes the "clinical creation of sex identities" (1998: 65), including the prohibitions on the "pedagogization of children's sex," "socialization of procreative behaviour," and "psychiatrization of perverse pleasure." Dangerously for a society in which neoliberal rhetoric is underpinned by relatively conservative notions of gender identity, as attested in Sarah McBride's memoir on the challenges of fighting trans-exclusionary legislation (2018), Corazon's narrative appears to defy the norm in regard to the taboo of adolescent sexuality. Expressing their confidence in their androgynous, cross-dressed sexual attractiveness, the teenage Corazon says of the effect they have on their peers,

"My hallmates are hanging out in one room together. I walk in with a trench coat covering up most of my body. They collectively gasp, *ooh*-ing and *ahh*-ing at my stockings. "I also got this," I part the trench coat and show off my new garter belt holding up my stockings. I'm showered with hoots of *Damn gurl! You so fine!* and *That is sexy as fuck*. That's right. I am sexy" (153).

Presenting androgynously at this stage, Corazon openly enjoys the advantage of being, as part of a recurring pattern, aesthetically and sexually attractive to others. They describe, for example, the comparatively large number of sexual partners in relation to their peers that they find and the satisfaction it appears to bring (131). In particular, their partner David is described with erotic language that moves from Gothic to the divine:

“We’re tangled in my bed. My laced legs feel fantastic rubbing up against David’s body. I feel so powerful, so wonderful. I feel happy with my body. David runs his hands over my thighs and legs ... I am a goddess ... We were so hungry. So hungry. We must be vampires or zombies or both ... I loved David like I love La Causa – fiercely, devoted, spiritually” (152-154).

The Transgender Gaze here switches from sultry to ecstatic, while also revealing Corazon’s confidence in their attractiveness and a pride in their relationship with David, also a queer person of colour, whose racialized experience of living in the U.S.A makes the bond for Corazon even stronger. The shift from twentieth-century trans narratives, with their adherence to middle-class and middle-aged propriety, to a confident assertion of adolescent sexuality, underlines *Trauma Queen* as a radically different transgender text to the trans biographies of the past. Referencing the twentieth-century canon of trans biography in turn, Pat Califia for example observes the stifling depiction of gender and sexuality in the autobiographies of Christine Jorgenson (1967) and Jan Morris (1974):

“In the two early MTF transsexual autobiographies, womanhood is equated with a rather rigid and limited definition of femininity. As long as a person looks like a pretty lady, Jorgenson and Morris seem to be saying, she is a woman. Sex ought not to be that important to a woman anyway, they both imply” (1997: 47).

By the standards established in the twentieth-century, it could be argued that it is in terms of sexuality and gender that Corazon's writing is at its most radical as a trans narrative. On gender, Corazon is open and defiant about their nonconforming appearance. Via the reference to yellow teeth and nose-slimming, additional subversion is connoted in relation to class and race:

“The way I present my body is not for others, it's for myself. Fuck contouring, fuck nose slimming techniques, and definitely fuck creating creases with eye shadows. I wear makeup to enhance my ugliness. Bright vivid lipsticks to contrast against my yellowed teeth. Tight shirts that my nipples strain against. Tighter skirts that show off my growing erections” (197).

The awareness of their teeth is characteristic of Corazon's self-aware focus on class and race in relation to their appearance, and how gender-nonconformity blends into these social dynamics. On another occasion in the memoir, they say,

“My mother always said I needed braces but we couldn't afford them. When people say they like/want someone with nice teeth, I automatically tense up. I become hyperaware of my mouth. I cover my face when I laugh to hide my teeth. I never flash my teeth in pictures. I sometimes refuse public speaking roles because I'm afraid of my teeth showing. They are uneven, crooked, and yellow despite years of brushing them every day. My teeth make me feel poor and ugly, but I've also refused braces because I want to make a statement that my teeth are my own ... I am not ashamed of my mouth. I'm working to unlearn shame around my teeth and class status” (192).

In wearing the clashing lipstick, the effect appears to challenge a White, Middle-Class Gaze, and in turn produces a Transgender Gaze from a partly racialized and economically-disadvantaged state of Uncanniness. Corazon in fact records some of the responses to their appearance to underline the impact of their non-binary and racialized significations:

“As I’m typing this on my phone, I look up and make eye contact with a white stranger whose eyebrows scrunch up before he looks away, and then quickly steals another glance before my face is out of eyeshot. And then another white man passes by and looks me in the eye for a few moments before looking away and blinking a few times. There’s that fearful curiosity again. No, it’s not my paranoia because once I pull up sweats over my skirt, zip up my black hoodie over my floral pink shirt, remove my fly ass hoop earrings, and take a rag dipped in make-up remover and swipe it across my face, I am invisible” (178).

Trauma Queen, with such observations from a defiant Gaze, precedes its echo in the performance of Daniela Vega of Marina in *A Fantastic Woman* as she meets the Cisgender Gaze with her own Transgender Gaze. Yet Corazon’s is a different kind too, in its assertion of a racialized, non-binary identity. Accordingly, as with sexuality, *Trauma Queen*’s position of alterity in the history of trans autobiographies and memoirs is evident in the self-analysis of gender, which Corazon refuses to connect to role models of any kind. Towards the end of the memoir, they reflect upon the limits of the language that they use:

“I’m beginning to understand that my gender is private. I don’t have words to describe my gender. It’s a feeling. It’s an essence. It’s an internal sight ... Though

I use trans woman of color, genderesscent, or two spirit (though I'm careful not to fully identify as two spirit since I am not as connected to my indigenous community as I'd like to be), these powerful identities do not capture my entirety" (196-197).

The pattern of gender expression in the text is significant for its tentativeness around transgender vocabulary. For the first half of the text, Corazon does not appear to identify as a trans woman, with a fluid non-binary association more evident. Their relationship with their body, at the midway point of the text for example, involves an identification with both male-signifying and female-signifying aspects of their body:

"I had to shave my soft beard, too. My red, blonde, and black beard. My comfort, my face, my natural contouring. I loved that my puberty gave me this beard. I loved that such varied vibrancy grew from my body. I loved my body hair, all of it, every last strand" (154).

In these types of confessions, Corazon underlines their unorthodoxy, an embodiment of Malatino's claim of how the Nomadic subject, typified by gender nonconformity, is at odds with the State and its imposition of boundaries (2014). Arguably, on these occasions, Corazon's approach to gender and to citizenship implies forms of communitarian-centred anarchy, though unlike a libertarian attitude, balanced elsewhere by the recurring expression of desire for community and networks of support.

In terms of labelling too, Corazon's self-conception rejects an explicit identification with women and thereby contrasts with other trans female accounts such as Mock's and McDonald's. Corazon says,

“Before you jump to conclusions and assume that I identify as a girl, read this: I do not want to be a woman. I am in the middle. Some days I feel like a man, some days I feel like a woman, and most days I feel like neither. So, for your information, I do not mind using male pronouns 24/7 ... Even if I look like a woman, I do not mind male pronouns. What I would love if you could do is use gender neutral pronouns when referring to me. My favourite pronoun of all is ne” (111-112).

In acknowledgment of the sometimes challenging relationship between an experimental or fluid subjectivity and pre-existing social identities, Corazon’s relationship with these labels is not linear. Later, they describe how they briefly “decide to ‘de-transition’ back to being a femme gay man” (131). Corazon’s gender-nonconformity does, however, consolidate with particular labels and a subjectivity that endures, and they ultimately settle on an identity as a transgender woman. Brief references are made at the outset to “gender dysphoria” with the desire to menstruate and experience “the period I’ve always wanted” (83, 67, 154). In a subsequent development when seeking permission to begin hormone therapy, Corazon tells their mother and later their grandfather that they are “trans” (128), though in an example of code-switching indicative of their uneasy relationship with white-related LGBT+ communities and language, they also identify as “a Two Spirit person” (162). Towards the end of the memoir, Corazon imagines corresponding with their mother, describing themselves as “a transgender woman” and “daughter.” The identification as a trans woman of colour then appears to crystallize by their nineteenth birthday, and with it the search for a community that includes the explicit inclusion of other trans women of colour (173). Approximately five years later and

writing as Luna Merbruja in their collection of poetry *Heal Your Love* (2018), the identification as trans woman and daughter and the use of *they/them* pronouns has endured.

By the recording of this eventual gravitation towards an established trans discourse, we return to the separate analyses by Owen and by Castañeda on the tense relationship between childhood/adolescence and adulthood, and how the former “contains transition, movement, and change” (Owen), while presenting “a threat to normative gender development and so to (normal) gender itself” (Castañeda). Corazon’s narrative arguably reflects this processional relationship, but also underscores the shrill mode of cisgendered panic. Castañeda for example highlights the adult-focused concern on social conditioning, and how “because of its presumed malleability, the child-body also becomes one that can be put back on course when it deviates from the norm” (60). Corazon’s narrative in fact reveals a gravitation towards stability as they enter adulthood, without the need for the explicit application of a Lacanian Law of the Father or the shelter of a mother-figure, as much as Corazon may yearn for the latter. In other words, Corazon over time works out for themselves their gender identity.

Lovemme Corazon’s Transgender Voice (2): on mental health and the screen of the childhood idyll covering familial poverty and violence

If homonormativity, as conceptualized by Duggan, rejects “radical social change or restructuring of society” (2002: 176), in the embrace of a “privatized, depolitized ... [LGBT+] culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (179), then *Trauma Queen*

is neither homonormative nor its extension, a mode of transnormativity that involves the ‘Good Transsexual’ for a neoliberal age. Fernandes has identified the kind of uplifting neoliberal narrative that is evident in the memoirs of Janet Mock, exemplifying “principles of upward mobility, entrepreneurship, and self-reliance” and where the trans subject enters “into a path of enlightenment and self-knowledge through the choices they make at key moments” (2017: 11). In turn, Fernandes warns how such narratives, involving “invisible and silenced people gaining a voice through stories” are “a rhetorical construction that amplifies some voices at the expense of others” (5).

Corazon’s is one such voice that does not get amplified in the mainstream, partly, one deduces and based on the analysis by Fernandes, because there is little upward mobility or entrepreneurship in the sense of fame and fortune. This is not because Corazon lacks talent or resourcefulness, as is evident at different points in the text. In one instance, a Letter of Reference by a teacher is displayed which lists some of Corazon’s qualities and accomplishments, and includes the conclusion that Corazon “will make a lasting impact on this world” (115). Corazon also takes pride in their achievements at one point, recounting,

“[I] won a scholarship ... I was published in newspapers, locally and nationally. I was on television. I spoke at board meetings. I drafted policies and lobbied for them in Sacramento. I mobilized students. Phonebanked for hours. Facilitated workshops. Attended workshops. Loved, laughed, cried, fought, won, lost, accepted, embraced, built community” (118).

In contending with often debilitating mental health issues, however, which at one point leads to them withdrawing from their studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz,

Corazon's story is one that highlights how talent and resourcefulness are not enough in the hyper-competitive, unequally resourced neoliberal state. Furthermore, we can see in *Trauma Queen* how mental health issues are exacerbated within the neoliberal state, as Corazon's combination of poverty, transness, and ethnicity, impact on their ability to function.

The supposed threat to social stability embodied by the transgender child, for example, as an anomaly to the otherwise normative space of childhood, is inverse to Corazon's experiences as described in *Trauma Queen*. It is worth returning to Owen's perspective, of how "Adolescence functions simultaneously as a site of discovery and disavowal," along with Castañeda's, of how "Transgender childhood becomes a threat to normative gender development and so to (normal) gender itself." What we see in *Trauma Queen* is not the near-destruction of a locality by Corazon, but Corazon instead at times at risk of obliteration by the institutions of the family, education, mental health support, and in relation to their family's poverty, the State, as Corazon's gender-nonconformity comes to the fore. Against the assertions of confidence, with the Transgender Voice and Gaze seemingly indifferent to hostility for much of the memoir, Corazon says at one point in the memoir, with an expressed desire for withdrawal from a cisgender-centred society:

"I curl into balls of despair and hope ... I think about why others refuse to see me for the beautiful majestic creature that I am, and how much easier life would be if I could live with selected friends who loved me for who I am and will be in the future. I think of careers that require little-to-no social interaction, accessing the

collateral damage done to my spirit when I'm misgendered, or forced to adhere to a binary gender and set of pronouns" (185).

The irruptions of loss of confidence and the impression of being worn down are no after-effect of leaving behind the stability of various social institutions such as the State education system. The institutional anxiety described by Castañeda is evident here in a correctional capacity, in which

"Transgender childhood becomes a threat to normative gender development and so to (normal) gender itself ... And yet at the same time, because of its presumed malleability, the child-body also becomes one that can be put back on course when it deviates from the norm. It becomes a recuperable transgender body in a way that the adult transgender body cannot, because the latter is already fully formed" (60).

Castañeda's description of institutional assumptions of a "recuperable" and "malleable" gender nonconformity are belied here in *Trauma Queen*, where the informed and self-reflective trans child/adolescent is already aware of the way the institution is attempting to corral their identity. This in turn leads to the combination of Corazon's distress and resistance, during the crystallization of Corazon's identification with trans identity.

Arguably, we see the sociological process of reflexivity in motion, described by Judith Butler in relation to queerness, as the process in which "prohibition becomes the occasion for reliving the instinct under the rubric of the condemning law" (1997: 81). That which Corazon is openly prohibited from being, in other words, arguably contributes to the solidification of Corazon's identification with the identity. Corazon for example describes the resistance they meet in various academic locations, with instructors who

directly challenge their identity. In recognizing the attempts at suppression, a resistance against the suppression also develops, creating cycles of oppression and counter-assertion:

“All the classes talked about, then disregarded, trans people. The Psych Stats professor stated, ‘We’ll be talking about Males and Females throughout this course, but for the sake of simplicity we’re going to ignore trans people altogether’ ... The Feminist professor talked about ‘bio men’ and ‘bio women’ in the first lecture, so I approached her and told her that was harmful language. I told her I was trans and that it made me uncomfortable. In the next class, she used me as an example and misgendered me the entire time” (158-159).

Ultimately, the attempt to delegitimize Corazon’s trans identity, between the family and school, fails in its objective, even as it causes Corazon distress. Also contributing to a decline in Corazon’s mental health are the kind of microaggressions described by Sonny Nordmarken, involving “commonplace, interpersonally communicated, ‘othering’ messages related to a person’s perceived marginalized status” (2014: 129). Nordmarken describes some of the common consequences as “chronic health problems and persistent feelings of alienation, anxiety, anger, depression, fear, hypervigilance, fatigue, hopelessness and/or suicidality” (130).

Compounding this apparently constant de-legitimization by the social-institutional figures of mother and teachers, however, is within the familial environment in the form of domestic abuse. Its traumatic impact is implicitly evident on Corazon’s life, in reflection of a broader analysis by Judith Herman on trauma, “Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and

community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others” (51). In *Trauma Queen*, oppression at its most visceral begins with the violence and abuse perpetrated by particular family members against Corazon during early childhood. The violence is compounded by the extended family’s defensive and sceptical response to news of the abuse. This appears to be a key source of Corazon’s experience of isolation, as they say, “They did not accept it and told my mother to ‘fix me’ instead of accepting me. I haven’t seen nor heard from my family since” (199).

On gender nonconformity and unlike Mock, whose mother especially is described as being supportive of her adolescent transitioning, Corazon is confronted by often violent parental resistance. With Corazon’s father a seemingly intermittent presence during periods of Corazon’s upbringing (115), Corazon’s relationship with their mother, herself an apparent victim of domestic abuse, appears fraught and is described as being punctuated by violence. It appears to fracture permanently on the issue of Corazon’s identification with being trans:

“I told my mother I am trans ... Well, more like I told her I was going to use my health care coverage to see if I could get hormones, but the trans thing came out as well. Her initial reaction was rejection, ignorance, and flat-out assholery. Then she talked *at* me for a half hour before I stopped her” (128).

The response of the mother can be said in this instance to conform to Castañeda’s analysis of the risks for the trans child: “because of its presumed malleability, the child-body also becomes one that can be put back on course when it deviates from the norm” (60). After one particularly violent episode when the child Corazon has been beaten by their mother, they recount,

“My body begins dissociation. My head swirls. Mom’s parting words are, ‘Quit your crying, sissy. I didn’t even hit you that hard’ ... I sat on the floor naked for a while. I kept thinking, *I just want to be dead. There’s no pain in death. I don’t want to be alive. I don’t want to be alive. I want to escape. I just want to be dead*” (20).

Cumulatively, the absence of support at home and at various educational institutions takes its toll. In the subsequent impact of familial violence, for example, partly against Corazon’s gender nonconformity, Corazon in adolescence recounts some of their experience in sex work, with the boost to self-esteem mixed with economic necessity:

“I needed sex. I needed to feel sexy. I needed validation ... For the most part, it was easy to dissociate. Some of my clients were ‘free’ – I fucked them for my pleasure. I couldn’t have sex solely with clients. That would fuck me up. I scheduled in guys I found attractive to please/boost my ego. To keep my sanity” (131).

The reliance on sex work for both money and self-esteem, in spite of its personal value in the latter case, is not romanticized by Corazon. They record various encounters with problematic clients, including those who appear to be racist (168) or that inflict physical abuse. Corazon describes an assignment with one aging client: “Bites my lips. Biting my cheek, neck, chest. The entire room is dipped in ink, my mind falling into the abyss of sexual assault and I begin to numb myself. I want to cease existing” (132). The need to dissociate from the encounter underlines the challenges of the sex work for Corazon’s mental health and the line walked between uplift and depression, and between tolerating and nausea. Overall, the representation is complex and ambiguous. In a post-

publishing interview, Corazon describes how their sex work lasted for a two-year period between the ages of seventeen and nineteen, partly due to their personal expectations of limited opportunities in the legal economy. This in turn may be based partly on race as well as the nature of the socio-economic structure, but also on being transgender. It highlights how Corazon's suffering is externally sourced. Corazon says,

“I got trapped in this notion that a sex worker was all I was, that all I'd ever be great at was sex work. That was kind of because I couldn't get a job, and when I did get a job, I had to conform to being a man, which requires shaving my hair, and that was the most dysphoric thing I've ever had to do” (2014: 78).

While Corazon turns to sex work for economic survival and for self-esteem, they also confirm towards the end of the memoir the breaking of contact with their mother, which arguably exacerbates Corazon's simultaneous insecurity and vulnerable desire for connection (200). Social networks and a sense of community evidently matter and related problems and crises contribute as a form of external stimuli to anxiety and even trauma. As Corazon says after the breakdown in relations with their family:

“I had no home. I had no place to go. My world was falling apart. What was I going to do? What was I going to do? I couldn't stay here forever. My family is gone. No more birthday parties. No more annoying siblings. No more hugs. No more crying. No more fighting. No home. No home. Never was there a home” (2013: 81).

Exacerbating the absence of family-based support networks and hostility within educational establishments is the inadequacy of mental health services. On the response to Corazon's suicide-ideation on one occasion, the institutional cure seems to depend on

pharmaceuticals, in which the diagnosis appears to be mainly chemical, and therefore personal, rather than social:

“Over Winter Break, when everyone has to leave campus and go back home for a month, I felt suicidal. I skipped the hospitalization and went straight back to IOP in San Jose. I drove there every day for 2 weeks. I was finally prescribed medication – Prozac and Seroquel. An upper and a depressant. Wake me up, put me to sleep. Good morning, good night” (133).

On the therapy and counseling that Corazon receives, the treatment similarly appears to exclude social factors such as suffering combinations of transphobia and racism within a cisgendered, white-centred, ostensibly nuclear-family-based locality. As Corazon notes of the implicitly racialized nature of the treatment:

“I went to therapy ... But I just couldn’t connect to an older white lady. Just like I couldn’t connect to my rape counsellor (a white woman) or the intern that was assigned to me after my suicide in high school” (133).

Corazon’s reflection here parallels other attestations by people of colour in the Anglophone Global North, who suffer the double oppressions of inhabiting a racialized, white-centred society while depending on mental health services that fail to acknowledge these factors. In the U.K.-based collection of POC accounts *The Colour of Madness*, the sentiments expressed by Corazon are similar to a recollection by a teenage person of colour, indyah: “She is patronizing, grated on me more and more as the sessions went on. She does not understand me. She does not understand any of us. She is white” (2018: 77). A similar account by another interviewee, Cassie Addai, identifies how the trauma of racial othering is left unacknowledged by therapists:

“Rather than understanding the client’s concerns as valid in the context of a society where institutional racism is rife, the black client is positioned as ‘crazy’ or ‘imagining things’ ... The implicit message is that therapy is not a space to talk about race” (145).

A third interviewee, Raman Mundair, concludes,

“I have found that my experience of operating in a society in which structural racism is inherent is absent from any measure of my health and well-being. When I present an ailment to a medical professional, it is abstracted from my lived context and, fundamentally, my illness is read as distinct from my experience as a woman of colour” (2018: 91).

In these testimonies, similar to Corazon’s, we see a cycle at work: the potentially debilitating existence of being a person of colour in the white-centred Anglophone Global North that fails to see its own dominant whiteness, including within mental-health services. Daily microaggressions, meanwhile, intensify the mental health issues. For Corazon, it reveals a cycle of suffering to be endured as a young trans woman of colour, sometimes in actions such as sex work that exacerbate the suffering but which appear to be one of the few options that allow for economic independence.

Lovemme Corazon’s Transgender Voice (3): On the Fragmentary Appearance of a Politics of Solidarity and the Tension Between Nomad and State Science

In its defiant and sometimes judgmental writing on the subject of society and community, Corazon’s particular, QTPOC-focused worldview can be said to reveal the

inadequacy of conventional politics understood along national lines, and with it the kind of movements of solidarity that fit into national narratives, of whatever political persuasion. Typifying the disconnection from white society, for example, is Corazon's poem detailing some of the microaggressions they appear to regularly encounter in the Californian city of Santa Cruz:

“Racist People of Santa Cruz, Please Stop

Asking what my name means

Guessing what race I am

Saying I have a Latin ass with Asian eyes

Praising me for my Bravery for being a queer brown femme

Trying to teach me about my own cultures

Reading me Gloria Anzaldua quotes

E-mailing me about the irrelevant white queer events on campus

Calling me a feminist

Appropriating dreadlocks

Claiming you're not racist.

You are” (133-134).

The rejection of feminism, evidently for its association with the agendas and worldviews of white, middle-class women and the settler-colonial communities they represent, as well as the indifference to white-centred or white-organized queer events, run parallel to the positions expressed by Mock. Collectively they highlight both the historic exclusion of people of colour and their experiences from such spaces, and the accompanying microaggressions anticipated by POC and QTPOC communities at them. In effect,

invisible pre-existing boundaries have led to alternative modes of activism among QTPOC activists such as Corazon. Corazon's activism does not offer ideas about bridging such a divide, rather they reveal it, and they organize accordingly for alternative spaces. *Trauma Queen* is the kind of document, unlike the memoir by the similarly aged white, upper-middle-class transgender senator Sarah McBride, *Tomorrow Will Be Better* (2018), which sees at least two Americas, not one.

Yet within QTPOC communities too, relations between Corazon and the community organizers sometimes appears fraught, suggesting generational tensions and logistical limitations, arguably intensified by Internet-Age social media. After a succession of disappointing experiences at QTPOC-organized events, Corazon for example says,

“In a month, I've been disappointed by three QTPOC organizations and their events. First, these organizations are all headed by cis people. Second, they claim to feature queer and trans performers of color, which is true, except they have no trans women of color ... You had cis men and women, and trans men. But no trans women?” (173).

In these experiences, we see evidence of the desire for affirmation by including people whose identities are reassuringly identical to Corazon. It is not enough to be a person of colour, in other words, or even a trans person of colour, but to be a trans woman of colour. Anything less is a failure of the space to accommodate Corazon, and gets called out accordingly. These incidents, tellingly, lead to Corazon accusing local QTPOC organizations of organizational and ethical failures in failing to ensure the presence of

trans women of colour at their events. Processing their interaction in relation to these organizations and communities with further reflections, Corazon says,

“I left the Bay Area QTPOC scene. With a heated Facebook argument with a new-and-upcoming QTPOC blog, I saw that people took the perpetrator’s side ... [Yet] It made me think about accountability. That’s what this was about. Okay, they messed up. There’s room for growth. What did I want from these organizations? Obviously, trans women of color. What does that mean, though? Did I want to out trans women who would then be placed in danger? Would trans women want to be known as trans before their other identities, like ethnicity, dis/ability, class, documentation status, etc.” (173).

Corazon’s reflections here highlight a tension between expectation and realistic fulfillment, in this case in consideration of the limits of a particular grassroots organization’s ability to control attendance in relation to inclusivity. This is especially difficult, as referred to by Corazon, given the desire of at least some trans people, from an already small demographic, to blend into society and not be defined as trans, and who accordingly may not desire to attend QTPOC-based events. Arguably, Corazon’s use of call-out culture is simultaneously understandable given their vulnerability and needs, but also in these instances unrealistic in practical terms. The interaction exposes a dynamic arguably exacerbated in the Internet Age where the combination of its broad geographical reach, and the impersonal absence of face-to-face interaction, contributes to new modes of social networking. Politically, with the development of an echo-chamber effect within these networks, we see an intensification in disempowered voices calling those in power to account for behaviours and utterances that are deemed problematic. Yet its

weaponization as a potentially counter-productive mode of public shaming has been noted at a broader level. Analyzing call-out culture as an activist tool in the twenty-first century, Loretta Ross highlights its potential toxicity in relation to public shaming, involving “the tendency, which is unfortunate, for people to want to publicly shame and humiliate” while calling them to account within public forums. Ross instead calls for a tonally more compassionate mode of accountability, which she calls “calling in”:

“A call in is actually a callout done with love and respect. Because you’re really seeking to hold people accountable for the potential harm that they cause, but you’re not going to lose sight of the fact that you’re talking to another human being ... I think calling in is going to be to the 21st century as a social justice practice what nonviolence was to the 20th century as a social justice practice. It’s about teaching us how to be together in a different way, even with people we would call opponents” (Ross, 2020).

Ross’s address of the significance of call-out culture has relevance to parts of *Trauma Queen*. Overall, Corazon’s sometimes fraught engagements with offline, QTPOC communities in turn appears to contribute to a dependence on online networks, involving shared, uniform codes of knowledge, etiquettes and recognition concerning transness and race/ethnicity that Corazon finds lacking in many offline organizations as well as society generally. As they say in relation to their mental health,

“The internet is a survival skill. I am not joking. I have found amazing amounts of support through Tumblr and Facebook groups. Moving from San Jose to Mountain House was the most isolating transition I’ve ever had to deal with. I sought out love, support, kind messages, and affirmations from internet strangers.

I was never disappointed. The internet facilitated friendships amongst other queer/trans people of color, survivors, beings that transcend Western genders and sexualities ... Online, I was a vulnerable, loving person. Offline, I was ignored and lonely; too scared to face the public with my ferocity. The internet is a safe, accessible space for me to share myself” (204).

Corazon’s relationship with these online networks is notable by its contrast to offline communities. The presence of like-minded, QTPOC communities online appears more difficult to replicate by the logistical limitations of geography and population demographics, even at locations where Corazon expects to share particular characteristics. On this sense of offline isolation, Corazon says of their experience at the University of Santa Cruz, prior to them withdrawing from the university:

“With my comrade being white and you being white I started wondering, Where are the Q/TPOC in my life? Where are the POC that want to date me? Why are white folks the only ones who accept my Two Spirit femme identity? ... I search for other Q/TPOC to find me desirable, especially online ... I’ve been alienated/abused/forgotten in Q/TPOC spaces that were created to welcome me. I’ve been navigating a university that would rather have my face on one of their *Welcome to UCSC!* pamphlets but not in the actual lecture halls” (162).

The passage here is an amalgamation of different, sometimes contradictory experiences, of the relative absence of communities of colour, including QTPOC communities, but also their deficiencies when they are encountered, in comparison to Corazon’s online experiences. Ambiguously, Corazon appears to concede how “white folks [are] the only ones who accept my Two Spirit femme identity,” implying that the queer and trans

people of colour encountered offline are less sympathetic and interested in Corazon than anticipated, and that white individuals may accordingly, on occasion, be more relatable than Corazon either expects them or desires them to be. On another occasion, Corazon also cites their trans identity as an additional barrier to being able to forge connections with other people of colour, saying, “I refused to connect to the other people of color on campus because, for the most part, they weren’t dealing with transness like I was” (134). With such expressions, it appears that Corazon views diverse social settings offline as increasingly anathema. The optimal situation appears to be a site where the greater the proximity of other people to Corazon’s specific identity as a trans woman of colour, the better. Online networks appear best positioned to offer these optimal conditions.

On the dependence of online networks, Jean Baudrillard contributes to one postmodern-focused source of critique that identifies online networks as unhealthy. He claims, “We are dealing with an attempt to construct an entirely positive world, a perfect world, expurgated of every illusion, of every sort of evil and negativity” (2000: 67). The consequences of the effects of a perfect online symmetry theorized by Baudrillard are shared in an analysis by Kevin Robins, who describes such online networks as “techno-communitarianism.” In these discourse-aligned worlds, recognizably similar to the ‘echo chamber’ effect recognized in relation to modern social media, Robins describes how comparatively imperfect offline, materially-based real-world societies are rejected for the anodyne quality of an illusory, online convergence:

“There is the invocation of community, but not the production of a society. There is ‘groupmind’, but not social encounter ... What we have is the preservation

through simulation of the old forms of solidarity and community. In the end, not an alternative society, but an alternative to society” (1995: 149-150).

What we see in *Trauma Queen* is arguably an example of such a techno-community in action, or at least a subject’s navigation of such a community. Corazon increasingly finds sanctuary in online networks, partly for the symmetrical nature of the cultivated networks that align with Corazon’s own experiences and worldview. Offline, the need to be among people who effectively replicate Corazon’s experience as a young trans woman of colour appears to lead to Corazon’s frustration, including with offline QTPOC communities. This dependence may indicate Corazon’s loneliness and isolation at the particular time of writing, in a period of their lives of upheaval and movement. It contrasts, for example, with both the stability in her professional and personal life of the New York-based Janet Mock, and her relationship with online media from her 20s onwards. Writing on her reluctance to engage in public call-out as an instance of this divergence from Corazon, Mock highlights how the position held by Baudrillard and Robins on online communities need not be absolute. She says:

“That’s been a conscious decision. It’s intentional. For me, I feel like there’s enough sadness in our world – like so much calling out online – that I refuse to engage in that stuff. I also don’t come from that hurt place. If something hurts me, I don’t use Twitter as the outlet for it. I use my boyfriend as the outlet for it. I use my best friend as the outlet for it. I use my girlfriends as the outlet for it. I don’t use social media for that ... I’m just not invested in call-out culture. I don’t think it’s that helpful” (2014b: 198).

Mock's position is insightful in highlighting a separate approach to online debates, including visiting online forums to vent anger and distress at organizations and individuals. Concurrently, Mock's mental health appears to benefit from maintaining an active online presence with careful distancing. Of course, Mock's mental health is also likely to benefit from her more stable and prosperous economic position and strong, offline network of friends and family.

Arguably too, however, Corazon's lower threshold against the perceived mistakes of others could be a sign of the writer's different age and maturity compared to Mock. Corazon, after all, is writing during their adolescence, as well as out of a sense of catharsis. Towards the end of the memoir, Corazon notes the "resentment" and the "grudges" carried into the writing and arguably released through the process:

"This is the beginning point in a longer journey of healing. Now that a piece of my story has been shared, I am willing to grant amnesty to myself for my mistakes. I am letting go of resentment and grudges. I want to start fresh. I want to carry my anger in ways that feel healthy for me. I want to forgive, not forget, and hold others accountable. With the ending of this memoir, I am depleted of most of my toxins. I will always be a survivor striving to grow" (207).

Because of the suggestion of a dynamic, rather than static, development of Corazon's perspective concerning community, we also see the complexity of their subjectivity, including in relation to the postmodern, Internet age. Corazon's community of choice, as we see by the end of *Trauma Queen* and in their pronouncements afterwards, is in fact, like Mock, not restricted to online interaction. For the defiance of their Gaze and the confidence and fluency of their Voice, Corazon appears to battle regularly – perhaps

daily – with being seen as different. A yearning for ‘community’ appears at least partly to be the desire to occupy a space free of microaggressions and de-legitimizations. Online communities provide one source of refuge, but as Corazon’s pronouncements in *Trauma Queen* and afterwards makes clear, the online networks are not enough by themselves.

On the need for offline networks too, Corazon says,

“My self-care was going to see my friends because being by myself was not the most pleasant thing all the time, and I very much relied on seeing other people ... It’s asking people to check in with me ... To me, communal care is having a friend cook you dinner, going home and having someone watch a movie with you. You’re going to go home and talk to someone or just do something with someone so that you’re intimately involved with each other’s lives ... Communal care is having those relationships” (2014: 80-81).

From the apparent desire for intimacy reflected in these reflections, we see the partial adequacy of the analyses by Baudrillard and Robins. With the mainstream discourse unaccommodating for an economically disadvantaged, QTPOC figure like Corazon, there is sometimes nowhere else to go but online. Its own echo-chamber dynamics are not necessarily healthy, but nor too are the various forms of abuse suffered by Corazon in the offline world for being a trans woman of colour in the Anglophone Global North. Finding a balance, and finding a community within this balance, seems vital to Corazon’s ability to find stability for their mental health.

Conclusion

Given the age of the writer and subject and the personal issues discussed, Corazon's *Trauma Queen* represents arguably the most vulnerably positioned of the texts analysed in this chapter. It is penned by a teenager dealing with forms of trauma which stem from gender dysphoria, racism, poverty, domestic forms of abuse, and the upheaval of social relations that sees them break contact with their immediate family, including their mother. In view of their shared academic excellence as scholarship-winning students, Corazon contrasts intriguingly with Mock, as "The 'right' kind of trans woman (educated, able-bodied, attractive, articulate, heteronormative)." Corazon is all these things too. Yet as mentioned, Corazon's text is also ideologically non-conformist: they speak consistently and regularly of the racism of white people and its institutions, to a degree where it is debilitating to their life, and the traumatized trans figure contending with the resulting mental health issues is unable to flourish according to the upwardly mobile neoliberal arc. Corazon therefore departs from the narrative of the self-sufficient individual, so integral to the U.S. fusion of its original settler-colonial mythos and neoliberal iteration that makes self-reliance a prime virtue and its opposite, welfare and support, into a vice. As Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade say of the U.S.A., this culture idolizes the narratives of "Horatio Alger, rags-to-riches, 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps,' streets 'paved with gold,' the rugged frontiersman, the benevolent philanthropist, and Obama as savior, among others [which] hide the uneven concentration of wealth, resources, and opportunity among different groups of people" (2013: 659). In turn, Corazon consistently and regularly emphasizes the importance of community. In the final passage of the memoir, Corazon also expresses an uncompromisingly abolitionist and communitarian position. They list explicitly political

ideas rather than role models or individual goals as the key to the liberation of the oppressed:

“I dream that the prison-industrial complex will be destroyed, that we go beyond education reform, that we have open border policies, that we give back land to indigenous folks and end blood quantum politics. I dream for health care services that are queer and trans empowering, for care practices that are non-abusive and sexually exploitive of disabled people. I dream of liberation” (208).

With such an explicitly politicized closing statement from a youthful non-binary person of colour, it is perhaps unsurprising that Corazon’s text did not gain greater traction in the mainstream, becoming instead a vividly written but out-of-print document expressing the wrong kind of trans experience. By this fate, *Trauma Queen* is arguably representative of the analysis by Fernandes on how “Those who are able to make their personal experiences legible to the mainstream through drawing on dominant narratives and devices are given a platform while other voices are silenced” (2017: 5). Ideologically and therefore commercially, within the majoritarian-focused market, Corazon’s Voice, characterized by its confidence and insight but also the rejection of a white-supremacist U.S.A., becomes silent.

Chapter 5

The Transgender Voice in Polemical Essay-Writing and Fiction

Introduction

On Capitalism: Grudging Assimilation or Revolutionary Change

So far, this thesis has analyzed texts whose relationship to neoliberal capitalism varies, from ideological conformity, as in *A Fantastic Woman* and Janet Mock's memoir *Redefining Realness*, to the suggested advocacy of significant, structural change. Of the latter, Lovemme Corazon's memoir *Trauma Queen* advocates at the memoir's end the abolition of the prison industrial complex, a creation that re-iterates – as convincingly argued by historians such as Angela Davis and Michelle Alexander – the U.S.A.'s post-slavery settlement, one implicitly designed to continue the socio-economic and political scapegoating, containment, marginalization and exploitation of black and brown people. As Alexander says,

“In the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. So we don't. Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color ‘criminals’ and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind” (2012: 2).

The prison industrial complex, however, can also be viewed as a foundation of the modern neoliberal state, as is discernible elsewhere in the world. As Naomi Klein says in relation to one of the intellectual architects of neoliberalism, Milton Friedman,

“the state’s sole functions were ‘to protect our freedom both from the enemies outside our gates and from our fellow-citizens: to preserve law and order, to enforce private contracts, to foster competitive markets.’ In other words, to supply the police and the soldiers – anything else, including providing free education, was an unfair interference in the market” (2007: 5).

Klein’s analysis aligns with patterns in other neoliberal nations, including the U.K., where an increasingly militarized police force combines with the erosion of civil liberties, including the right to protest (Gayle, 2021). This is suggestive of how the growth of the prison industrial complex, while distinctively racialized in the U.S.A., is an increasing phenomenon in capitalist countries generally, as evidenced by the kind of prison expansion occurring in the UK, for example, at this time of writing (*GOV.UK*, 2020).

The U.S.-based Mexican writer Jamie Berrout goes further than Corazon in addressing some of the structural issues within neoliberal capitalism in the U.S.A. In her essays and articles, Berrout calls for nothing less than the overthrow of capitalism, viewing it as a product of white-settler colonialism. In the foreword to the TWOC anthology of short stories that she both edits and contributes to, *Nameless Woman*, Berrout describes the “multiple crises” of trans women of colour. She identifies them as being caused by “the interconnected poison wells of capitalism, anti-blackness, white supremacy, and settler colonialism that we can never truly escape them, crises of health which at their least severity still threaten to separate us from our communities and our

creative work” (2017: 15). Evidently, the position stated here by Berrout and her co-editor Ellyn Peña of the Trans Writers of Color Collective reveals a different kind of trans discourse to that of Sarah McBride and even Janet Mock. Their respective calls for Clinton-led legislations and/or relatively minor re-distributions of funding would, they claim, allow trans people and people of colour to assimilate into the socio-economic success, as enjoyed by the white, cisgender population. Berrout’s works explicitly reject this position.

This divide is arguably part of a broader one among ostensibly LGBT+ communities in the Anglophone Global North, and beyond it. In proximity to McBride and Mock is the writer Maggie Nelson, who appears to typify in her memoir *Argonauts* a reluctant, even impotent relationship between implicitly white, middle-class queerness and the capitalist order. On the latter, Nelson’s otherwise intellectually-informed prose is reduced to an uncharacteristically brief, crudely articulated, and undeveloped position, “there is some evil shit in this world that needs fucking up, and the time for blithely asserting that sleeping with whomever you want is going to jam its machinery is long past” (2015: 33). In this segment of her book, Nelson both distances herself from an explicitly anti-capitalist protest in Oakland, California, while articulating the limits as she perceives them of the activist spaces she herself occupies and potentially embodies. Nelson notes,

“the anxiety and despair so many queers feel about the failure or incapacity of queerness to bring down civilization and its institutions, and their frustration with the assimilationist, unthinkingly neoliberal bent of the mainstream GLBTQ+

movement, which has spent fine coin begging entrance into two historically repressive structures: marriage and the military” (32).

Citing queer theorist Leo Bersani, Nelson highlights both the production and consequences of homonormativity and assimilation in limiting the possibilities of queer activism: “If there’s one thing homonormativity reveals, it’s the troubling fact that *you can be victimized and in no way be radical*” (32). Nelson’s meditations in *Argonauts* are a lucid demonstration of a privileged queer writer who both recognizes the destructiveness of neoliberal capitalism – for others, at least – while accepting its inevitability. It is a position reflective of what Mark Fisher calls the effect of Capitalist Realism, “a matter not of apathy, nor of cynicism, but of reflexive impotence. They know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can’t do anything about it ... It is a self-fulfilling prophecy” (2009: 21). Yet it can also be argued that Nelson, like McBride and Mock, is also writing from a position reflective of material success. Ultimately, neoliberal capitalism has worked in their favour; it is unsurprising, therefore, that they resist articulating a structural critique of a system that benefits them at a material level. In this sense, we see how LGBT+ voices in the mainstream are the movement’s ‘winners,’ and as the saying goes, LGBT+ history in the mainstream is shaped by their biases and reluctant acceptance of the status quo. These are in turn positions that are disseminated via publishing deals with high-profile publishing houses. What we see in their texts is LGBT+’s relationship with neoliberal capitalism, from a particular, if ubiquitously disseminated, position of privilege.

Anti-capitalist, intersectional discourse of João Gabriell

More in alignment with the trans-based capitalist critique of Berrout is that of João Gabriell, who in relation to the experience of being a trans person of colour in France, describes “the ineffectiveness of ‘LGBT’ and the universalizing hold of the ‘trans person’ labels” (2015: 63). For Gabriell, the condition of being a trans person of colour is defined less by an ‘LGBT’ discourse than by racism, including its violent implementation via institutions of state. His analysis is intersectional, postulating how LGBT+ activism occludes the multiple reasons behind the suffering of socio-economically disadvantaged trans people of colour in France. Gabriell says,

“transwomen are disproportionately represented as victims of murders that are not solely transphobic, but follow from *a formidable overlap of situations of domination*, such as, poverty, violence resulting from the criminalization of sex work, experience of homelessness and life in the streets, and incarceration etc” (61).

Single-issue activism within LGBT+ spaces is for Gabriell, unhelpful, projecting unity and the benefits of a single agenda onto disparate groups whose suffering may not be caused purely – or even mostly – because of LGBT-related oppression. Gabriell quotes Lalla Kowska Regnier, who similarly says of the situation at least in France, “LGBT is a fictitious alliance. It is imperialist and completely fits around the capitalist machinery. It invisibilizes, stalls and/or prevents the emergence of unique cultures of minorities within its purview by privileging the most dominant culture, that of, men” (63).

While Gabriell is careful to demarcate the situation of trans people of colour in France from the situation of trans people of colour in the U.S.A. (63), his analysis

connects to more radical and structural social critiques, which view liberation as dependent not on trans-based assimilationist activism, but on the reformulation of the socio-economic sphere. As Gabriell says, “It is crucial not only for the most vulnerable trans people themselves, but also in order for us to join the larger movement against exploitation and oppression in the neoliberal phase of capitalism” (60). Gabriell’s position underlines a separation within trans communities, as apparently existent in France as it is in the U.S.A. with activists such as Berrout and in the UK with such collectives as *Radical Transfeminism* of Nat Raha and Mijke van de Drift (Raha, 2015). Exemplifying this divide is the emphasis on a political radicalism that rejects assimilation into the capitalist status quo and aspires to the restructuring of social institutions at large.

Concerning these examples, the essays and short-story fiction of Berrout are particularly distinct within the Anglophone Global North, with Berrout’s blend of anti-capitalism and implicitly necropolitical analysis taking form in her rejection of publishing for her own collective arrangement, allied to her call for societal revolution. In analyzing her texts, what becomes clear is not only the inadequacy of the critiques that bind trans subjectivity to a notion of apolitical masquerade by postmodern theorists, but also the narrowness of mainstream, assimilationist trans and queer activism. Reading the works of Berrout from an initial mainstream LGBT+-activist position, one sees the need to comprehend alternative trans communities, their distinct agendas, and the possibility of more radical, structural solutions to the problems many trans people encounter.

Jamie Berrout: introduction

Since her emergence as a writer and editor circa 2017, Jamie Berrout has been as a prolific and in some ways mysterious voice – contrary to other recognized trans figures, from celebrities to academics, little can be gleaned about Berrout’s personal life. Rejecting the kind of curated personal story identified by Sujatha Fernandes as shifting “the focus away from structurally defined axes of oppression [to] help defuse the confrontational politics of social movements” (2017: 3), Berrout utilizes a variety of different literary mediums to critique her country, its racism, and its neoliberal capitalist system, while arguing for collective action. Using the polemical format of the essay, she attacks the publishing industry for its selective and exclusionary practice of publishing only “bland, neoliberal, faux-universal narratives of cishetero POC life” (2017a: 12). Similarly as editor of a self-publishing collective of trans and queer women of colour, most notably the anthology *Nameless Woman* (2017a), her testimony of the challenges faced by writers writing outside of the mainstream has contributed to the exposure of gatekeeping in the publishing industry against anti-neoliberal, anti-racist narratives in QTPOC storytelling. Finally, as a writer of speculative fiction, most notably her self-published collection *Portland Diary* (2017b), Berrout imagines, as described in the book’s blurb, modes of oppression and resistance in a variety of genres, across landscapes of “dystopian futures, ecstatic visions of liberation, narrow escapes, and betrayals.” Throughout these short stories, the situations depicted involve economically disempowered trans women of colour who find themselves as “racialized people, queer and colonial and mentally ill subjects, enemies or collaborators to the bloodthirsty

Western imperial machine, disposable labor for a capitalist system that threatens to devour the world.” Without talkshow promotions and accompanying lifestyle narratives, and without the highly resourced support of a mainstream publisher, Berrout arguably represents the “invisible and silenced” voices of Fernandes’s critique, somehow in spite of everything, having made her voice heard for anyone who encounters it, with normally obscured truths about the U.S.A.’s neoliberal society.

Berrout’s Essays: A Voice from a Collective of Voices that Challenges the Gate-Keeping of the Publishing Industry

Over the course of two years, between her editorial foreword in the anthology *Nameless Woman* published by the *Trans Women Writers Collective* (2017a), to her two self-published letters in May and August 2019, Jamie Berrout develops her position against the publishing industry and more broadly against capitalism and the ideologies of whiteness and gender. These are substantial targets, her opposition emerging from the suffering of violence she sees as being inevitable for trans women of colour. Added to this state of danger is the absence of opportunities for trans women of colour to enter mainstream society and its problematic institutions, and live, on a day to day basis, away from a life characterized by poverty, precarious working conditions, and the threat of the prison industrial complex.

We see one part of her analysis in the editorial of the short-story anthology *Nameless Woman* co-edited with Ellyn Peña. There, Berrout and Peña highlight the limited, selective process determining who succeeds in getting published. “We

understand well,” say Berrout and Peña, “that when only some of us are allowed to publish or otherwise receive support or payment for our creative work, it is not genuine opportunity but rather the curse of tokenism” (2017a: 151-152). The publishing environment Berrout and Peña perceive is an extension of the one endangering the lives of economically disadvantaged trans women of colour generally. “If it isn’t apparent already,” they state, “what we’re describing is a condition of permanent crisis” (152). Berrout and Peña highlight the high number of fatalities that trans women of colour suffer in the U.S.A., confirmed elsewhere by the statistical evidence, for example how of the fifty-three transgender victims of murder in the U.S.A. between 2013-2015, eighty-seven percent were trans people of colour (*Free CeCe!*: 77.22). Yet their perspective is not individualized, but formed from seeing the intersecting oppressions of racism, misogyny, and transphobia as cultural and institutional:

“Just as black trans women and other trans women of color are being murdered with impunity in devastating numbers, just as the value of our lives means essentially nothing to our communities of color and to our supposed white trans allies and the legal authorities who kill us through their own brands of violence and forced marginalization, so also are our voices, our innovations, and our collective memory made worth nothing” (2017a: 152).

The legal authorities, they claim, appear to provide not an alleviation or any form of protection but a further source of oppression against a racialized minority. The reference by Berrout and Peña to “white trans allies,” meanwhile, consistent with the expressed experience of CeCe McDonald, Janet Mock, and Lovemme Corazon, as well as João

Gabriell, implies either a failure or absence of a broader politicized, activist community, coalition, or network.

There is, therefore, consolidated here, further evidence of a divide between the political aspirations of at least some communities of trans people of colour and white-centred trans spaces and identity. The de-legitimizing position held by social commentators and journalists with its projection of a monolithic trans identity formed around a single dogma (Žižek, 2019; Turner, 2019), is also exposed. Accepting the politicized, anti-capitalism of Berrout as a starting point, it becomes evident that Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics is reflected in Berrout's position, in which the lives of people of colour are reduced in validity in relation to white identity. As Mbembe says of racism in relation to capitalism,

“more so than class-thinking (the ideology that defines history as an economic struggle of classes), race has been the ever present shadow in Western political thought and practice, especially when it comes to imagining the inhumanity of, or rule over, foreign peoples” (2003: 17).

Citing Hannah Arendt, Mbembe views “the politics of race” as “the politics of death” (ibid), within a framework of legitimate and illegitimate lives and the sovereignty that decides their respective destinies via institutional instruments. Berrout's life experience and politics are a reflection of these social dynamics, her response a defiant, considered position emerging from a vulnerable community. In contrast to the claim made by theorists such as Baudrillard, Braidotti, and Žižek of the fragmentary nature of postmodern identities and the rejection of metanarratives, the necropolitical concept of Mbembe and Berrout's own anti-capitalist position demonstrates evidence to the

contrary of their postmodernist claims. Finally, Berrout's writing is also reflective of the intersectional dynamic within activism encapsulated by trans artist Nick Mwaluko's observation, "I don't think the Western model – that single-issue model – is *ever* going to work for people of color" (2014: 172). Berrout's output is similarly representational of an intersectional effect of particular structural inequalities upon certain trans and queer identities, an effect apparently ignored both in mainstream LGBT+ activism and mainstream-dominated cultural theory critical of transness.

On Structural versus Single Issue Voices, with Berrout's Revolution against McBride's Assimilation

The difference between the political aspiration within Berrout's writers' collective of trans women of colour and mainly white, mainstream transgender activism especially relates to the latter's broadly assimilationist single-issue approach to trans welfare. In the memoir *Tomorrow Will Be Different* (2018) by the then-National Spokesperson of the Human Rights Campaign (and since 2020, Delaware state senator), Sarah McBride, we find the articulation of a trust in the political systems and ethos of the U.S.A. viewed as failing by Berrout and Peña. "We strive," says McBride,

"toward a world where every person can live their life to the fullest. While the progress is uneven and can come in fits and starts, I still know today ... that, with hard work and compassion, we can make more tomorrows better than today" (8).

McBride's optimism in her activism to enact change within the existing institutions and culture of the U.S.A. is a recurring theme in *Tomorrow Will Be Different*. Of the accompanying myths of the American Dream, McBride declares,

“The promise that we will be judged on our merits at work and ensured equal access to basic necessities no matter our identity is a sacred covenant upheld and defended by our government. It is the foundation for any person to pursue the American dream” (2018: 84).

McBride's celebration of the successes in trans policy-making in 2015-2016 indicates a belief in making adjustments within the existing structures. She notes,

“In the months ahead, the progress continued to roll in: enhanced protections for transgender students, the removal of the ban on transgender service members in our nation's military, and the release of protections in health care that [husband] Andy had fought for throughout our relationship” (228).

In these legislations, trans citizens are officially given access and significations of legitimacy within the U.S.A.'s neoliberal society, for McBride a broadly meritocratic polity, but described by Berrout as “settler colonial capitalism” (May 2019: 5) in an echo of bell hooks' analysis of the U.S.A. as “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (1992: 22). In these analyses, the institutions of the military and law enforcement terrorize economically disadvantaged people of colour, both in terms of the U.S.A.'s own citizens and those of other countries. This has particular implications for the trans-focused policy of military service that places McBride's support for, and focus on, the right to military service in a problematic light.

In focusing on legislative work, McBride appears to occupy one side of an ideological divide between herself and Berrout, with implications for their divergent attitudes to hate crimes against trans women and a broader structural view of society. For McBride and her legislative work, racism and transphobia appear to be individualized acts of irrational prejudice, founded on beliefs incompatible with the basic norms of civic decency within the U.S.A. A Cambridge Dictionary definition of racism reflects this position, emphasizing racism as a belief rather than an institutional ideology: “the belief that people's qualities are influenced by their race and that the members of other races are not as good as the members of your own, or the resulting unfair treatment of members of other races” (2019). Yet such definitions appear not to reflect racism as discussed and portrayed by Maria Lugones’s post-colonial, structural definition:

“*Racism*: one’s affirmation of, acquiescence to, or lack of recognition of the structures and mechanisms of the racial state; one’s lack of awareness of or blindness or indifference to one’s being racialized; one’s affirmation of or indifference or blindness to the harm that the racial state inflicts on some of its members” (2003: 44).

According to Lugones’s definition, the perspective of McBride of the U.S.A. as a broadly level-playing field, offering a general accessibility of the American Dream to all its citizens, may be said to reflect the criticism of a “lack of awareness of or blindness” to the experiences of economically disadvantaged people of colour. Berrout’s position, meanwhile, is in alignment with Lugones’s post-colonial position and that of historians such as Angela Davis (2003), Michelle Alexander (2012) and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2016). They identify the U.S.A.’s structural re-iterations of slavery and erasure of its

black population in the form of Jim Crow, segregation, and during the era of neoliberalism so far, mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex. These different positions of Berrout and McBride epitomize a significant gap in the way trans activism appears to view U.S. society and its institutions. Arguably, the institution most explicitly targeted by Berrout's necropolitical analysis in her essays is not the military, however, but mainstream publishing and its ideological gatekeeping of storytelling.

By May 2019 in her piece *Against Publishing: A Letter to Trans Women Writers*, Berrout has developed her critique of publishing that reflects hooks's perception of a "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" as well as Mbembe's idea of necropolitical ideology addressing racial politics as "the politics of death." Berrout accordingly says, "Publishing after all is a culture of death" (May 2019: 3), connected to notions of deserving and undeserving figures that are selected to succeed and fail. Berrout says,

"It is rooted in the fascist notion that there are people who deserve to write and those who don't; that it is good and well for editors to determine who gets to write and be published based on a writer's proximity to whiteness, their social class and level of education, their ability (in contrast to disability) to overwork themselves and create a nice product that fits into their capitalist model, and their willingness to perform literariness and craft, all of which are arbitrary, racist ways of determining what is proper and what is improper, human and less than human" (May 2019: 3).

By viewing the contemporary model of publishing as "racist" and "fascist" in its production of a partly racialized form of ideological gatekeeping, Berrout also draws connections with the ethos of competitiveness in neoliberal capitalism. As William

Davies says, neoliberal capitalism “consigns the majority of people, places, business and institutions to the status of ‘losers’ ... [where] failure and weakness are also earned: when individuals and communities fail to succeed, this is a reflection of inadequate talent or energy on their part” (2017: xvi). Berrout associates publishing houses with this accompanying, stigmatizing ethos of deserving winner/loser. In particular, she highlights the gatekeeping role of publishing houses as part of a binary mode of society where one segment of society is consigned to economic suffering, including the silencing of their narratives. On the strategizing usage of a ‘meritocracy’ narrative by the gate-keeping institutions, Berrout says,

“The fantasy that justifies it all goes like this: the publishing houses and presses perform the function of safeguarding literature and the reading public by selecting the very best manuscripts for publication out of so many mediocre submissions ... And doesn’t it sound familiar, this idea that if a writer works hard, does everything right, and waits long enough that opportunities will open up, that through competition the best among us will rise to the top?” (May 2019: 4-5).

Yet the separation of the “very best manuscripts” is for Berrout deceptive. She instead emphasizes the role of ideology in determining and enforcing notions of quality, “their demands for bland, neoliberal, faux-universal narratives of cishetero POC life” (2017a: 12). Trans narratives that critique or are reflective of the U.S.A.’s neoliberal-capitalist economy as a racist state, according to Berrout, are rejected. This becomes especially so when the writer – such as Berrout – demands of the publishing house an ethical approach reflective of the writer’s own anti-racist ethics. On her first novel *Otros valles*, Berrout says “In 2015, Topside Press emailed wanting to publish it but when confronted with

their racist practices and a demand for them to fundamentally change, they lost interest” (Berrout, jamieberrout.com).

The ethos challenged by Berrout, of competitiveness and opportunity, connects to Fernandes’s identification within neoliberal storytelling of “principles of upward mobility, entrepreneurship, and self-reliance” (11). Also similar to Fernandes, she views the supposed quality of neoliberal stories as a cover for ideological conformity, which again highlights the ideological divide between her and McBride in their respective perceptions of the U.S.A. In the foreword to McBride’s *Tomorrow Will Be Different* written by then-Vice President of the U.S.A. Joe Biden, there is a reference to the broader attempt to advance “equality for LGBTQ Americans ... that basic belief held since our founding, that we are all created equal, endowed with basic unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (2018: x). The inclusion of Biden for the book’s foreword, with his legislative background in both supporting trans rights while intensifying via the 1994 Crime Bill the racialized mass incarceration in the 1990s against the African American communities (Stolberg and Herndon, 2019), again typifies the difference in perspective with Berrout. Berrout, for example, makes a structural criticism that identifies “the fiction of meritocracy that every neoliberal politician, every Republican and Democrat, has been selling us for the past half century in the face of growing inequality and the increasingly obvious incompatibility of settler colonial capitalism with human life” (May 2019: 5). Berrout’s dismissal of the political structures of the U.S.A. is one outcome of her analysis of a gap between the myth of meritocracy and the actual entrenched inequality, with the result of violence against trans women of colour on the margins of neoliberal capitalist society. Davies similarly highlights the

inevitability of such a development within neoliberal culture’s “ethos of competitiveness” (xvi), where unacknowledged prejudices and unconscious biases can intensify, leading to the emergence of “authoritarian attitudes towards social deviance” (xviii). With mainstream capitalist society expelling, as Berrout states, economically disadvantaged trans women of colour to the margins, Berrout’s response is to reject the idea of assimilation as a political strategy, including in relation to publishing. As an alternative to a neoliberal capitalist framework, she emphasizes “the need to organize and build systems towards accountability and start taking collective action to reject meritocracy, end publishing, and destroy this pillar of capitalism and settler colonialism” (7).

Building on this piece with an implicitly necropolitical, and explicitly anti-capitalist framework, is Berrout’s letter *The End of the Poetry Foundation* (August 2019). In this piece, she reaches out to the finalists of a poetry fellowship, urging them to withdraw. Berrout highlights the Poetry Foundation’s connections to exploitative practices and violence, its “long history of being a home for the worst imperialists and financiers, with such luminaries as their current president Henry Bienen, ex-CIA man and former banker who helped usher in the Great Recession over at Bear Stearns” (1). In her criticism, the foreign policy of the U.S.A. is identified in reference to covert, imperialistic interventions in the Americas, while the financial system upon which the U.S.A. is based is also condemned. Neither of these areas is addressed by McBride in her activist-focused memoir, or by Nelson’s brief and limited observation of “some evil shit in the world that needs fucking up” (2015: 33), but for Berrout they connect with a broader anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist position integral to the politics of her collective, and she elaborates accordingly. Berrout notes, for example, the price gouging and market manipulation in

relation to the company the Poetry Foundation is partly based upon, *Eli Lilly*, with the latter's involvement in the pharmaceutical industry. Again, the politics of exploitation is raised by Berrout, including in a reference to the poor pay of *Eli Lilly*'s workers. Berrout refers to,

“the hundreds of unionized janitors at Eli Lilly who were forced to risk a protest campaign a few years ago because they'd been paid poverty wages for so long or the victims of Eli Lilly's brazen doubly digit insulin price hikes (and price fixing with its competitors) who chanted at a protest, ‘Your drug prices are homicide!’” (2).

As elsewhere, Berrout's focus is structural, with a broader rejection of capitalism. She asks, “What's wrong with success? Well, that's the thing. Any success that is achieved at the expense of other people's lives, that's no success at all” (3). With such a position, we see a different approach to work, collective rather than individualistic, typified in a telling contrast by Janet Mock's single-minded pursuit of a career in the media, as exemplified in such utterances in Mock's second memoir *Surpassing Certainty*:

“because I was always in a rush, I chose to accelerate six-week adaptations of both so I could beat my classmates – who would graduate in December – to the job market ... I didn't want to see work as just a competition, but I figured besting my coworkers' output would help me shine ... I was hungry, ambitious, and eager” (2018: 152, 175).

For Mock there is no contemplation of the causal relationship between the dog-eat-dog competitiveness needed to prosper, and the inequality that exists. By contrast, Berrout's praxis, involving unionizing the trans women of colour who work within her collective, is

part of an ambitious larger goal. It involves “organizing, rejecting success and meritocracy, pursuing radical, non-hierarchical forms of publishing ... organizing with other trans women writers towards revolution” (6).

The revolution propounded by Berrout, involving the end of the current structure of publishing and ultimately, the end of capitalism, appears comprehensively at odds with the politics and activism of Mock and McBride, who in turn can be said to typify assimilation and adjustment as the goal of the transgender movement. What Berrout’s collection of writings here exemplifies is both the absence of a single trans or queer community or a set of shared goals, as assumed simultaneously by many mainstream critics and activists, and how trans subjectivity need not be apolitical and/or assimilationist. In this respect, and in parallel with Mock’s own political affirmation, McBride’s assertion in support of the Presidential candidate from the 2016 election Hillary Clinton is particularly stark in the assumptions it conveys and the divide it exposes. McBride says,

“Throughout the election, Hillary Clinton had run the most trans-inclusive campaign in history. She had endorsed all of the major policy goals of the trans community, lifted up trans people and voices, and consistently included trans people, explicitly, in her vision for a kinder, more welcoming country” (239).

The reference to a singular trans community in this statement, along with “all of the major policy goals” that McBride associates with it, is at odds with the revolutionary politics of Berrout and her collective. There are, in fairness to McBride, policy goals that appear to be shared with Berrout, for example affordable health care for people generally (2018: 149), an aspiration articulated in Berrout’s short story ‘Subject’ (2017). However,

McBride's espousal of military service available to trans personnel is comprehensively at odds with Berrout's goals, as is articulated in her short story 'Mansion' where the U.S. military is connected to the machine of state violence against people of colour throughout the world (2017b). Furthermore, McBride's identification of Clinton's neoliberal, carceral-focused politics as benign to all transgender people has been rejected by other trans activists such as Yve Laris Cohen, who advocates like Berrout for "antistate, anticapitalist, abolitionist politics" in contrast to the policies "of Hillary Clinton" (2017: 332). Overall, the focus on material and structural conditions is evident in the pronouncements of numerous trans artists of colour in North America, from Van Binfa in his analysis of gentrification, affordable housing, and precarious work conditions (2014: 24-26) to Kiley May's description of her own writing as "anti-colonial, anti-corporate, anti-capitalist" (2016: 214).

Berrout's fictional storytelling, similarly, is an expression of an aspiration similarly missing from celebrated, mainstream trans narratives. Commercially successful fiction about trans lives, characterized not only David Ebershoff's *The Danish Girl* (2000) but also by trans and non-binary writers such as Imogen Binnie and her novel *Nevada* (2013) or Akwaeke Emezi and *Freshwater* (2018), do not include a backdrop that explicitly presents the U.S.A. as "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" or generally oppressive towards people of colour. For expressing a perspective that appears to be substantially shared but seldom witnessed in mainstream trans narratives, the fictional output by Berrout is especially valuable. Her book of short stories, *Portland Diary* (2017b), represents in a variety of genres the lives of socio-economically disadvantaged transgender women of colour living in the U.S.A. While two of the stories, 'Valeria' and

‘Salvation, OR,’ address the violence of the prison industrial complex and law enforcement against socio-economically disadvantaged people of colour, it is the story ‘Mansion’ that combines both resistance against violent institutions of state with a critique of an informal ideological complicity of a white, middle-class LGBT+ activist movement. In its satirical treatment, ‘Mansion’ is arguably Berrout’s most nuanced work in the collection on these themes and an important reflector of significant ideological divisions between different trans communities.

Jamie Berrout’s short story ‘Mansion’

i. The Protagonist’s Voice of the Disempowered TWOC Community, Against The Antagonist’s Voice of Celebrity Activism and Mainstream LGBT+ Self-Interest and Privilege

In Berrout’s ‘Mansion,’ the arc of the protagonist, the volunteer activist Aurora Castillo, transforms from frustration to rejection of a mainstream LGBT+ organization. Her narrative voice, with the story channeled through her perspective in the first person, has multiple significations reflective of Andrew Anastasia’s analysis of how the transgender voice can signify “multiple meanings at once: a sound that represents a person, the agency by which an opinion is expressed, and the expressed will of a people” (2014). In ‘Mansion’ similarly, the protagonist’s voice provides the physical means of dialogic interaction with the antagonist, but it also represents the protagonist’s ethics and their agency to other characters and to the reader, while also symbolically being the voice

of a disempowered Other within the LGBT+ movement. On analyzing satire more generally, Dustin Griffin asks,

“Is satire essentially conservative or radical? Does it serve to defend traditional values, support the established order, and ‘safeguard existing boundaries’? Or does it serve instead to challenge authority, to question or subvert conventional values, to disrupt and even tear down foundations? (1995: 149).

There is no question that Berrout’s satire, consistent with her work across several modes of writing including poetry and essay writing, is constructed in relation to the latter.

In spite of the somber, ethical issues at play, a playful subterfuge undergirds the story. In its background, and contributing to the overall theme of resistance against a violent, overbearing power, Aurora for example references a prestigious office block of symbolic significance. Its electrical servers have been hacked by an unknown, subversive movement, with the lighted office windows at night spelling messages of condemnation of a bank and its involvement in the prison industrial complex, the military industrial complex, and general racism against the black and brown population. The messages include: “THIS BANK BUILDS PRISONS / BUILDS DETENTION CENTERS / ROBS FROM BLACK FAMILIES / FUNDS ENDLESS BLOODY WARS / FUNDS RACIST BORDER WALL ... CAN IT BE DIFFERENT / CAN WE BE HEARD” (21-22).

Aurora mentions sympathetically a crowd of protesters briefly taking over the building, creating a communal, workers’ co-operative, before the police move in and expel them. Amid some of the subterfuge of the anti-establishment hackers, the protagonist too is a trickster, albeit a reluctant one. At the story’s outset, Aurora for example steals an award meant for the antagonist. At the story’s end, she traps the antagonist in the shooting range

basement of the antagonist's mansion and appropriates the mansion for the homeless. On the one hand, therefore, 'Mansion' plays with universal storytelling ideas, an LGBT+ equivalent of the re-distributive heroism of a Robin Hood figure locking away the bullying Sheriff of Nottingham before appropriating their castle and lands for the dispossessed. On a more contemporary theme, the protagonist can be said to imprison the celebrity object of 'worship' in the story, given that the antagonist is both rich and famous. The social criticism in this respect extends as a comment to the value of celebrity activism and trickle-down identity politics, including within trans activism.

With these conclusions, as well as storytelling conventions, 'Mansion' exemplifies many of characteristics of satire. As John Gilmore defines this variable style of storytelling, "it is necessary for it to have a target, for it to be directed against something, whether that be as broad as the human condition ... or, more narrowly, particular manifestations of this, or even particular individuals" (Gilmore, 2018: 174). This narrow focus already suggests a reduction of a complex issue into an unambiguous depiction, and here is arguably the danger of a simplification, or at least, the risk of a perspective that must occlude a degree of complexity or ambiguity that one might expect outside of literary satire and instead in literary realism. Gilmore says,

"If satire is a mirror held up to society, we need to remember that the mirror image is not a direct copy of its original, since it reverses left and right. We may wonder if satire is not in fact more akin to the kind of distorting mirror traditional in fun-fairs and carnival sideshows, in that it presents a partial or warped view of reality, but at the same time we may also feel that this can sometimes reveal a sort of higher truth" (176-177).

Characteristic of satire's general tone, the narrative voice and depiction of characters in 'Mansion' encapsulates this paradoxical grotesqueness of a "higher truth," or as Gilmore also calls it, "fantasy, exaggeration and distortion" (176). Specifically in the case of 'Mansion,' this mode of truthful exaggeration involves the depiction of the real-life LGBT-advocacy foundation, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC). Within this portrayal, the antagonists similarly conform to satire's representation of types rather than fleshed out characters, such as "the fool, the boor ... the proud – rather than specific persons" (*goldsteingrill.com*), in this case the HRC's privileged leadership that occupies "salaried positions" while impoverished volunteers, including the protagonist, work for free (13).

Class and race evidently underpin this divide within the LGBT+ location. A key scene is the opening articulation by Aurora, of her desire for the HRC to address "homelessness, food insecurity, access to healthcare and jobs, legal aid for trans women in the sex trade, and dismantling the laws that criminalize sex work" (15). The leader responds in a "proud" patrician-like tone of impersonal condescension characteristic of satire, indicating a more empowered economic class that expects deference from the socio-economically and organizationally subordinated members: "I suppose I can forgive you for not knowing this, but there's a process – a right way and a wrong way of going about creating policy. You have chosen the wrong way. Say it" (14). Aurora's issues of concern are dismissed by her immediate superior's continuing quasi-militaristic assertion of authority, including a presumption that the leadership's agenda will be inclusive and representative of every transgender person. In an echo of Lovemme Corazon and Janet Mock, each critical of mainstream LGBT+ organizations in the U.S.A. being managed by indifferent white, well-resourced figures, the HRC here is also depicted as being managed

by a privileged man, his stiff, formal mode of speech again evocative of hierarchies and patriarchal positions of authority:

“As a trans man, I’m offended by the insinuation that our organization should have a different set of trans policies. We at the junior HRC are a community-based organization – that means the community has chosen us to set priorities and whatever we decide to do will always be in the best interest of the community.”

The leader’s assumption here, of occupying the norm, is evocative of Maria Lugones’s critique of ethnocentrism, an aspect of LGBT+ spaces that Berrout repeatedly satirizes in the story. Lugones for example says,

“Being unaware of one’s own ethnicity and racialization commits the inquirer to adopt a disengaged stance, one from outside the racial state and the ethnocentric culture looking in. *But it is one’s culture and one’s society that one is looking at*” (2003: 45-46).

The consequence of this lack of awareness is a situating of self as the neutral and rational norm, one assumed to apply for others as the subject’s default setting. As Lugones says, “you do not see me because you do not see yourself and you do not see yourself because you declare yourself outside of culture” (46). In turn, this self-perceived sense of neutrality “privileges the dominant culture as the only culture to ‘see with’ and conceives this seeing as to be done non-self-consciously.” In ‘Mansion,’ the white, middle-class norm of the LGBT+ space shapes the *de facto* agenda.

If the trans male leader of the HRC appears nameless in ‘Mansion,’ then the protagonist’s central antagonist, military advocate Jennifer Pretzel, is depicted with a greater level of detail indicative of the touchstone significance in the story, namely the

policy issue of trans people in the military. The satire is also more direct, given the similarity of her name and narrative to the real-life Lieutenant Colonel and billionaire trans woman Jennifer Pritzker, who donated \$1.35 million to trans rights activism in 2003. Pritzker's donation, according to Janetta Louise Johnson and Toshio Meronek, went to "a think tank that is focused on changing US policy to allow trans soldiers to serve openly" (2015: 264). As if to challenge via satire the morality that incorporates Pritzker's donation, the lobbying organization in 'Mansion' headed by Pretzel, the 'Proud Trans Soldiers Initiative,' recreates the acronym PTSI: post-traumatic stress injury. This satirical element is exemplified at the close of Pretzel's opening speech, in which she declares, "the Trump administration believes trans men and women have no place in the military, but I promise you that, battle by battle, in the Supreme Court and in the hearts of the American people, the PTSI will prove him wrong!" (18). Aurora's response to Pretzel's campaign is the watershed moment in the story when she decides to detach from the HRC, stating, "I saw at last that the cause was worthless, beyond absurd." As well as identifying the imperial and racist nature of U.S.-fought wars, Aurora notes the divergence in aspiration with economically disadvantaged trans women of colour. She says,

"No trans woman I'd talked to in my entire life had ever prioritized getting trans people into the military over housing homeless trans women, feeding the people we knew were going hungry, and providing medical care for the many of us falling apart without it. If anything, most trans girls seemed in favour of abolishing the military altogether."

Aurora's position here, demanding structural change as opposed to assimilation into the U.S. institutions imposing state violence, reinforces a broader real-world difference in trans outlooks and subjectivities. Similar to Berrout and the story of 'Mansion,' Karma Chavez, Ryan Conrad and Yasmin Nair of the U.S.-based "all-volunteer, anti-capitalist collective" of radical trans and queer activists, *Against Equality*, identify the focus on marriage rights for queer and trans people "as wrong-headed." They state, "military inclusion and expanded hate crime laws have only served to exacerbate US militarism and the prison industrial complex" (2016: 215-216). In this vein, 'Mansion' articulates the rejection of assimilationist activism. Aurora's final act of locking Pretzel in her own basement shooting range, before appropriating Pretzel's mansion for the homeless, is a Robin-Hood-style guerrilla act and an illegal one, though one where conceptions of crime and the law are implicitly tools of the white-supremacist state and therefore open to legitimate transgression. The very basis of this society and its discriminatory legal system, in effect, is rejected.

Contributing to this sense of futility in compromising is the depiction of Pretzel as the primary antagonist. She is less caricatured in 'Mansion' than the nameless HRC leader, but still reveals over the course of the story an obnoxious persona: symbolically hers is the voice of mainstream LGBT+ activism. Pretzel's voice in turn reproduces an entrenched binary perspective of trans activism and aspiration rooted in class and race. The fixed nature of the divide, and the impossibility of compromise in spite of Aurora's initially optimistic intentions, are revealed when Aurora visits Pretzel at her home in an initial attempt at conciliation. "Jen was a smart, reasonable person," says Aurora, "and I was looking forward to having a lively discussion about the pros and cons of her Proud

Trans Soldiers Initiative” (26). Yet after Aurora’s criticism of President Trump, the tone of their exchange changes, with Pretzel defending Trump as a “formidable, decent man.” Articulating a pro-military allegiance with a social conservatism devoid of sympathy, Pretzel also espouses an ethos of severe self-reliance:

“I’ll get all those parentless, runaway trans kids into the military schools. I’ll scrape every homeless trans person off the streets by getting them enlisted. I don’t buy any of that mental illness, feeling sorry for yourself junk, all they need is something to care about” (28).

As well as showing indifference towards young homeless trans people, Pretzel reveals racialized prejudice towards Aurora, connecting her ethnic identity to a deserved and complicit poverty. On discovering that Aurora works for free as a volunteer, Pretzel laughs, and says, “Lord, you Mexicans really do love to do other people’s work for them. You’re Mexican, right? That’s not racist if you are, it’s just accurate.”

As a story whose *idée fixe* is based around the anxieties of trans women of colour of economic disadvantage, and the related indifference of the economically privileged mainstream organizations meant to support them, ‘Mansion’ underscores a tangible hostility to and rejection of white, middle-class, transgender and queer spaces and the assimilationist politics they represent. In acknowledgment of Griffin’s analysis of how “satiric pleasures often take the form of gratifying our aggressiveness or our sense of righteousness,” it can be argued that a characteristic ferocity in Berrout’s work shapes the representation as more “aggressive and moralizing rather than inquiring or provocative” (1995: 186). Yet given the severity of the issues at stake for the disempowered referred to in the story, it can also be argued that the story requires nothing less.

ii. Trans activism at the real Human Rights Campaign (HRC)

The satirical, explicitly pejorative portrayal of the HRC and its leadership in ‘Mansion’ can be said to replicate at a fictional level the distrust harboured among queer and trans collectives of colour against white-dominated, middle-class queer activist spaces. Lori Saffin notes how “most queer organizations are run by whites, national political agendas, such as gay marriage, are fronted by white gay men” (2015: 166). She cites Dean Spade’s analysis of the financial, class-based hegemony that dictates trans and queer policy-making, with Spade noting that “The most well-publicized and well-funded LGBT organizations have notoriously marginalized low-income people and people of Colour, and framed political agendas that have reflected concern for economic opportunity and family recognition for well-resourced and disproportionately white LGB populations.” Associated to the “framed agendas,” Chavez, Conrad and Nair highlight “the holy trinity of mainstream gay and lesbian politics: Gay marriage, gays in the military, and hate crime legislation” (2016: 215). The tension between this legislative “holy trinity” is exemplified in the analysis by Johnson and Meronek of the Pritzker donation of \$1.35 million to allow trans soldiers to serve openly (2015: 264). Johnson and Meronek highlight by contrast the lack of funding of the anti-carceral-focused organization Transgender, Gender-variant, and Intersex Justice Project (TGIJP), their “shoestring operating budget of less than \$100,000 per year, with which they serve hundreds of trans people in and out of prison.”

At a more specific level, a parallel with the HRC is also instructive. A foundation ostensibly committed to representing transgender people in relation to civil rights in the U.S.A., the HRC's mission statement claims to aim for "an America where lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer persons are ensured of their basic equal rights – and can be open, honest and safe at home, at work, and in the community" (*hrc.org*, 2019). Yet in 'Mansion' the HRC is presented as narrow, privileged, and out of touch with the lives of the socio-economically disadvantaged. It is also dominated by a strategy of assimilation within a racially authoritarian, neoliberal capitalist state. As noted in Chapter 6, the experience of CeCe McDonald during her incarceration, in which the HRC failed to provide either public support or apparently resources and aid, is one example of how the emphasis on mainstream respectability and accompanying single-issue focus on trans-specific policies ignores more pressing, life-impacting issues of poverty and socio-economic exclusion. Another real-life example is an observation by queer activist and artist Julio Salgado about a real-life Marriage Equality rally at the U.S. Supreme Court in 2013, which similarly indicates the potential tension between mainstream queer activism and the needs of socio-economically disadvantaged queer people of colour. Salgado says,

"The Human Rights Campaign folks were not letting trans folks or undocumented people speak publicly at the rally. It's like how hypocritical! It just shows that once you go into this political bubble, you think that you're going to change shit, but you're going into the same thing, the same bullshit" (2014: 158-159).

The kind of single-issue, policy-making strategy implied in 'Mansion' is arguably reproduced in McBride's memoir *Tomorrow Will Be Different*. The memoir focuses on legal processes in the U.S.A. involving updating personal details such as name and

gender (56-59), as well as the issue of receiving adequate health care (149), and at a university level, gender-inclusive student housing (22). A large segment of *Tomorrow Will Be Different* in particular is devoted to McBride's campaigning for equal marriage rights (96), and a "Gender Identity Nondiscrimination Act" (97), policies which reflect the critique by Chavez et al of an informal "holy trinity" dominating LGBT+ policy-making.

A divergence between the policy-making focus of the real-life HRC and the issues raised by the protagonist in 'Mansion' highlights another, arguably broader gap concerning the dependence in the better resourced, mainstream activism on law-making as a way of addressing queer and trans issues at a social level. Sharon Cowan for example believes "the contemporary thirst for law as a route to equality does not address deeper more structural questions of inequality," with "Law's techniques ... themselves insufficient to take on the power of dominant, social sex/gender discourses and scripts" (2015: 1, 7). Cowan's conclusion, that "law is inadequate, and arguably powerless, to address deeply engrained social perceptions, stereotypes, and injustices" (2), is reinforced by the perspectives of activists from collectives and organizations of trans women of colour such as Miss Major Griffin-Gracy. Griffin-Gracy criticizes the funding, for example, devoted to lobbying and legislating to allow trans people to join the U.S. military, over projects that might help the many trans people who fall into social destitution. Similar to *Against Equality*, Griffin-Gracy says,

"mainstream gays and lesbians still don't care about us; they're not doing things to help keep us safe or to help promote us. They spent millions and millions of dollars [lobbying] for the right to get married. 'Oh yay, let's get married.' OK,

what about taking some of that billion dollars you spent and using it to set up programs to get kids through schools with [being bullied], to help transgender people keep it together through all the stuff that they have to suffer and get the help that they need to become stable” (2017: 28).

As mentioned, the characterization of the HRC leadership in ‘Mansion’ serves a particular satirical function, the leader’s pomposity and arrogance being symbolic of the position of privilege he occupies and the top-down, policy-driven strategy he pursues. Yet in turn, it is worth questioning the accuracy of the representation of privilege beyond the functional caricature, given its comprehensively negative depiction of the HRC’s most high-profile activists. What does appear accurate is the connection between the HRC’s real-life leadership positions with apparently privileged, white and upper-middle class former youth volunteers for the U.S. Democratic Party. The HRC’s real-life President at the time of Berrout’s story is Chad Griffin, a former campaign youth volunteer for President Bill Clinton who became at nineteen years old an employee at the White House Press Office, before later campaigning for other Democratic politicians such as Hillary Clinton (Summers, 2015; Ring, 2018). The HRC’s National Spokesperson in the same period is the aforementioned Sarah McBride, who is candid about her class privilege in *Tomorrow Will Be Different* while growing up in a family socially connected to national Democrat Party politicians:

“I grew up on a picturesque block of large homes in west Wilmington, Delaware, a beautiful tree-lined street of three-story, symmetrical houses built in the 1920s. The neighbourhood was filled with young families of lawyers, doctors, and accountants. The kids, all roughly my age, would meet every night for a game of

tag or capture the flag. While it was the 1990s, the atmosphere could have been the 1950s” (11).

Studying at the Washington D.C.-based American University, not unlike Griffin’s education in the same city at the similarly prestigious Georgetown University, McBride reflects on her position as a representative of transgender people by interning at the White House in her early 20s, McBride says,

“I’m an admittedly imperfect messenger for that role. My privilege and experiences limit my experience. It’s easy to express – and genuinely feel – empathy for a young, white, conventional-looking trans girl; it’s another to maintain that empathy when your differences are compounded by race, gender expression, class, religion, or circumstance. Nevertheless, I’d made it into the White House and I hoped to utilise it to do some small good” (63).

In spite of the privileged class, however, McBride also appears to be quite different to the satirized figure of arrogance and comfort in ‘Mansion.’ As a spokesperson, her exposure to hate crimes by anti-trans activists, for example, results in the discomfort and potential trauma she experiences in her role. In her description of the campaign for a Gender Identity Non-discrimination Act, McBride says of the concerted backlash,

“My social media accounts were filled with threats. The dark web, the underground websites that have become home to ‘alt-right’ trolls, filled with conversations about gang-raping me or murdering me. In the days after the post, my workplace was forced to heighten their security protocol because of the threats that were coming my way” (235-236).

On hate-crime-related issues that McBride engages with, the moral panic surrounding trans women in a women-only public space may also transcend class and race. Various transgender accounts, for example, including those explored by trans writers of colour in fiction, highlight trans women's fear of being assaulted and harassed in public and private spaces. They also explore a survival strategy of assimilating into heteronormative society. These fictional accounts in the anthology co-edited by Berrout, *Nameless Woman*, include Jasmine Kabal Moore's 'The Girl and the Apple,' in which a train journey becomes a time-bending exploration of the protagonist's anxieties. These address both the administrative issues around updating personal details – making the protagonist the anthology's eponymous 'nameless woman' – and failing to 'pass' as cisgender and the possible repercussions for her. In other words, some single-issue transgender-specific initiatives, as fought for by mainstream activists like McBride, do appear to be aligned with those in collectives of trans women of colour seeking more fundamental change. Other causes, however, such as equal marriage rights, are considered low-priority when compared to more urgent, life-and-death issues such as school bullying, police harassment and violence, and the prison industrial complex. Further still, initiatives such as advocating for trans people in the military appear ethically objectionable to particular trans collectives and organizations, given their connotations with imperialism and the mass killing of poor people of colour in other parts of the world by the U.S.A.'s military industrial complex.

The satirical, unsympathetic depiction of leaders in stories like 'Mansion' may, therefore, to a degree accurately reflect the positions of privilege and power enjoyed by those representing mainstream organizations and the way they occlude other,

disempowered trans communities and their separate political aspirations. However, at least some of these activist leaders, such as Sarah McBride, are not immune to harassment or potential violence themselves, while some of the issues they advocate devotedly for appear to intersect with those of TPOC communities. In examining this gap between fictional representation and reality, it can be argued that sensitivity and awareness of different trans communities and their aspirations should be an essential component of any trans advocacy, particularly those occupying positions of power and/or privilege.

The Transgender Voice in Jamie Berrout's Sci-Fi Short Story 'Subject': On the Tension Between Subject / Subjected within 'Late Capitalism'

Jamie Berrout's sci-fi short story 'Subject' includes characteristics of cyberpunk, in which "alienated loners who lived on the edge of society in generally dystopic futures," are "impacted by rapid technological change, an ubiquitous datasphere of computerized information, and invasive modification of the human body" (Person, 1999). In 'Subject,' a protagonist consigned to the margins of a hi-tech, white-centred, cisheteropatriarchal society, strives to assert their agency, including in relation to their transness. In terms of genre, the story's relationship with time is intriguingly reflective of the kind of malaise identified by Mark Fisher in relation to neoliberal capitalism. As a contrast, meanwhile, with sci-fi / cyberpunk short stories such as Mari Kurisato's *Impostor Syndrome*, the QTPOC (and cyborg) protagonist is centred within a dynamic situation, in which the human population of Earth is in the process of leaving a dying

planet. As an integral element of the cinematic plot, time is of the essence, and the protagonist must move with a sense of urgency if not to be left behind. Not so in Berrout's 'Subject,' in which the protagonist is ostensibly a trans woman living in an apartment block, a human among other humans, amid general inertia. The technologies appear to be recognizable, furthermore, to those of the reader in the Anglophone Global North at the time of the story's publication in 2017. The crisis, then, is not of things coming to an end, but of things continuing as they are. In this respect, a major theme is the personal crisis in relation to autonomy and political voice among QTPOC communities, a mode of social commentary played out in fantasy. Concerning the protagonist's recognizable and contemporaneous anomie, this includes a distance from being able to influence an economic, political, and social sphere. Such forces are seemingly immune to individual influence and appear effectively diffuse and de-centred beyond the control of its disempowered citizens. In parallel to Mark Fisher's conception of Capitalist Realism with its pervasive "sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility" (2009: 7), the location in 'Subject' reflects Fisher's analysis of how "late capitalism" has "seeped into the very unconscious ... has colonized the dreaming life of the population [and] is so taken for granted that it is no longer worthy of comment" (8). Signifying this cultural malaise for Fisher is the increase in issues of mental health among the generally younger generations. Fisher concludes, "[it] is a matter not of apathy, nor of cynicism, but of reflexive impotence. They know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can't do anything about it ... It is a self-fulfilling prophecy" (21). Arguably, this anxiety is captured in the title of Berrout's story, and the tension between its possible meaning as noun or verb, tied to either agency or to modes of subjection. Accordingly,

‘Subject’ can be read according to the backdrop of a society of disconnectedness, undercurrents of hostility and crushing isolation, as well as the struggle for love and connection. The title’s ambiguous meaning addresses key themes in the narratives of isolated, economically disempowered trans women in a neoliberal society, with a subject torn between autonomy and a depressing, often un-nameable oppressiveness. Additional themes, addressed in the work of Sandy Stone and Paul Preciado, about the trans person’s relationship to various sanctioning authorities, described variously as the “medico-legal system” (Preciado, 2019: 206), or “medicolegal/psychological establishment” (Stone, 2006: 261), contribute to this overarching tension regarding transgender agency. Finally, we see in alignment with the concepts of biopower by Michel Foucault and Achille Mbembe’s Necropolitics how it is not enough to understand the oppressions being described in Berrout’s storytelling according to a framework critical of neoliberalism or bigotry against trans people. Racism in ‘Subject’ contributes its own major dynamic, including in the salvation the protagonist finds via the networks of support from other Hispanic-Americans in the story. ‘Subject,’ like Berrout’s other writing, highlights how only an intersectional reading will show the force of oppressions at play on the trans individual.

Story overview

‘Subject’ ostensibly involves a Hispanic-American trans woman called Julieta Ramirez, living alone in an apartment complex after exiting a challenging family life with her unsympathetic brothers and their families. Towards the story’s end, we learn that

Julieta is a form of Artificial Intelligence existing within virtual reality, as constructed and overseen by a corporation. Her personality has been created from a memory scan of an economically disadvantaged transgender woman of colour, selected to ensure a lack of self-confidence in the subject and thereby ensure control of her. However, within the virtual reality she occupies, Julieta falls in love with another apparent A.I. subject, a Hispanic-American social-justice activist called Magaly. Towards the end of the story, and as a result of her blossoming relationship with Magaly, Julieta's sense of autonomy from the corporation's control becomes increasingly pronounced.

i. The Trans Female Voice in 'Subject': Subject as agent

Subject, *noun* – a person who lives or who has the right to live in a particular country, especially a country with a king or queen: “a British subject.”

Subject, *noun* – the person or thing that performs the action of a verb, or which is joined to a description by a verb: “Bob threw the ball.”

(Cambridge dictionary online)

The themes of control and autonomy in 'Subject' are central to its premise: Julieta's subjectivity as a trans woman of colour is intrinsic to the corporation's desire to limit her. As Julieta's creator, the corporate manager Rachel, states with an invocation of a discourse of power, “The instant an artificial intelligence reaches broad cognition, it becomes impossible to control” (2017b: 57). In response to issues of resistance by a

previous A.I., Rachel has constructed a subjectivity for Julieta and other A.I. subjects based on some of the most vulnerable members of society. Rachel says,

“every one of them a woman alone in a room, isolated from the world, lacking trust in or a strong sense of herself due to trauma, either forcibly sterilized or resigned to that fate in return for the slightest recognition of her humanity ... A paralyzed being; it lives, helpless, unable to move without the orders we feed it” (59).

There is here a similarity with other QTPOC sci-f narratives such as Kurisato’s *Impostor Syndrome*. Its focus is on historical oppressions of Native American women who suffer from the kind of structural inequalities that endure from previous centuries. In this respect, Foucault’s framework analysis of biopower is useful in identifying this theme, in which sovereignty exercises power in relation to “the population, with the population as political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power’s problem” (2003: 245). As Foucault says, there are limits to the level of sovereignty that can be formally exercised, in which “either [you] have people put to death or let them live” (240), and this limit has implications for the more marginalized members of society, more vulnerable to the exercising of sovereignty. Specifically, Foucault highlights the exercising of control of race/ethnicity, predicated on a majoritarian anxiety, and a consequent dehumanizing of particular minorities. He says,

“The more inferior species die out, the more abnormal individuals are eliminated, the fewer degenerates there will be in the species as a whole, and the more I – as species rather than individual – can live, the stronger I will be, the more vigorous I will be. I will be able to proliferate” (255).

Sovereignty in ‘Subject,’ to paraphrase Foucault’s concept, may be limited to exhibitions of control mainly involving birth and the execution of death but Rachel, as Julieta’s creator, accordingly has the power of life and death over her extremely vulnerable subject: Julieta’s existence within virtual reality is revealed at the end in a “sealed basement lab five stories below ground” (60). Rachel’s control over Julieta’s desires, as a symbol of the medico-legal system too, includes being able – within the virtual-reality world – to limit Julieta’s access to medical treatment for transitioning. Reproduction is another major area of biopolitical concern and control for the corporation. As Rachel says of the previous and ultimately terminated A.I., Adam, whose power grew to the point of exceeding the company’s control,

“not even the unparalleled computing power of their GPU data centers was capable of doing anything but arrest the creep of Adam as it pursued infinite replication within the sealed facility ... So this is exactly where our efforts have been focused – the issue of control” (58).

Control, then, is wielded against Julieta that is both potentially destructive and restrictive in terms of certain provisions but also limited in its range to effect change on her day to day. As Foucault says, “Sovereign power’s effect on life is exercised only when the sovereign can kill ... It is the right to take life or let live” (2003: 240-241). In ‘Subject,’ it becomes evident that Rachel cannot control Julieta’s moral and intellectual development as a subject, and there is little choice but to ‘let’ Julieta ‘live.’ Once created with consciousness, Julieta begins to make choices that unpredictably take her further from her point of constructed origin and her designation as a virtual prisoner within her apartment. This has implications on the way her subjectivity can be viewed in relation to

the authority attempting to control her: power is weighted in the authority's favour, but the power comes with a mode of surveillance that deceives itself as to how much it can control. There is a gap, then, between power's ability to legislate, on the one hand, and to wield control on the other.

More specific to trans identity, the apparently all-powerful corporation and its manager, Rachel, can be said to typify the relationship between the trans person to the medico-legal system, as analyzed respectively by Preciado and Stone, with its controlling and shaping of transgender lives. Again, in this case, transness will happen anyway, even as those in control attempt to restrict it. Preciado provides an elaborate, more neoliberal-related upgrade of Stone's original concerns, in which medical-associated trans discourse is viewed as a commodified, manipulated construction. Preciado re-conceptualizes this medico-legal domination as the "pharmacopornographic complex" (2013: 352), in adaptation of other multi-faceted neoliberal institutions such as the prison-industrial and military industrial complexes. For Preciado, the pharmacopornographic complex wields a similar influence that includes encroachment and control over other, pre-existing structures of sovereignty such as the nation state, in effect a steadily evolving "process of privatization of contemporary nation-states ... [which are] progressively absorbed" (390). The effects of this process produce a "government of sexual subjectivity" (33), including the "*invention of a subject* and then its global reproduction" (36). The recurrence of this word with multiple meanings, 'subject,' re-connects us to Berrout's short story. The protagonist is, first and foremost, a 'subject' in the sense of autonomous person, with 'subject' as noun. Preciado sees the subject as both noun and verb, as both agent and subjected to, under the illusion of a liberating, medical discourse. In response to this

restrictive liberation, Preciado defies the subjection of medical discourse of ‘transsexual’ identity via their adoption of an alternatively conceived relationship with the testosterone he ingests: Preciado regards himself as a junkie (2013: 251-257), while the hormonal change he undergoes reflects a futuristic, computer-age relationship with technologies, a “a dyke-transgender condition made up of numerous biocodes” (93). To a degree, Berrout also plays with this blurring. Yet the protagonist in ‘Subject,’ Julieta, ultimately appears to assert her own identity without needing to reject the medical discourse. In effect, she takes from the discourse what is useful to her, while asserting her own identity too.

In the protagonist’s ability to develop consciousness and act with some degree of autonomy, ‘Subject’ reveals some limits with Preciado’s conceptualization of dysphoria and the control of the medico-legal system over the trans female subject. Preciado’s assumption of potential passivity, for example, appears reductive in seeing subjectivity firstly as a monolithic entity that can only be one thing entirely, or nothing. Yet it can be argued, for example via Lacanian analysis, that no system of discourse is monolithic; as Jacqueline Rose says, the Symbolic is not “a rigid, monolithic structure, but unstable and shifting” (1985: 45). In reflection of such analysis, Donna Haraway’s envisioning of subjectivity in her *Cyborg Manifesto* involves “permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” (15), and acknowledges the primary place of flexibility for understanding how agency can occur in spite of apparent ideological conformity. Within ‘Subject,’ the protagonist Julieta may be controlled in terms of the dynamics of biopower, but her transitioning and subjectivity appear to be determined and desired by her in evolving circumstances. To refer back to Foucault, the corporate power that establishes medico-legal barriers around Julieta, has “the right to take life or let live,” but the latter

element in this statement is evidently no less important than the former. Julieta's narrative arc underscores her agency. From her decision to leave behind her family home and the transphobia of her brothers, Julieta makes clear the causative influence of social interaction:

“our family's house fell into the hands of my older brothers and their collective pack of offspring – who were never allowed close to me out of a concern that my existence, what was spitefully referred to as my lifestyle, might confuse the children ... I was done explaining myself to them and had no interest in refereeing the arguments between them for a second longer” (34).

Julieta's subjectivity, as a result of her decision to leave her family home behind, has endured against hostility and dehumanization within the specific social sphere of the familial realm. There is consideration, determination and resolution in her decision-making, including the awareness of what she stands to lose, in alignment with her aspiration and its value to her. Simultaneously, her arc is hardly linear in suggesting a transgender life will be easy for her, a thing of commodification. Typifying the challenges of her daily life, outside of medico-legal discourse, is an incident she describes that demonstrates her resilience and courage:

“dissociat[ing] for days from the latest incident to break me ... like being followed from the store as the sunset wore into darkness by a creep who called me princess then bitch then puta travesty miserable the further he went, so that I never again left my building alone within hours of night” (48).

Julieta's persistence and self-belief in overcoming such harassment are significant factors in the outcome of her circumstances as a trans woman of colour. As she says of the quasi-spiritual aspect of her transitioning and her independence,

“I had a special alarm on my phone set twice a day to remind me – every morning and every evening, just after the hour I'd appointed for taking my hormone tablets – to give thanks for everything I had and to take note of all that I was looking forward to” (34).

The medicalized aspect of her transitioning in short is a lesser aspect to the more profound, individual meaning. In turn, and in incorporating different social dynamics from both subculture and the mainstream, Julieta's destiny encapsulates Haraway's “permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” (15). She is, for example, both defiantly a Hispanic-American woman but also one wearily at odds with her own family. She must exist within a white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy while making as enjoyable a life for herself as possible as an economically disadvantaged woman of colour. Related to the latter point especially, she must interact with a manipulating, explicitly profit-driven medical system in order to receive the treatment she desires. Her interaction with such a system, however, does not imply passivity given her awareness of the structural inequalities inherent in the health system. Returning to the conception of a monolithic discourse, or ideology, Cornelius Castoriadis notes its iterative, impure nature,

“History exists only in and through ‘language’ (all sorts of languages), but history gives itself this language, constitutes it and transforms it. To be unaware of this aspect of the question is to continue to consider the multiplicity of symbolic systems (and hence institutional systems) and their succession as blunt facts about

which there is nothing to say (and nothing to be done), to eliminate the prime historical question concerning the genesis of meaning, the production of new systems of signifieds and signifiers. And if this is true of the historical constitution of new symbolic systems, it is just as true of the use, at every instant, of an established and given symbolic system” (2005: 138).

Castoriadis’s analysis, of the ever-changing, and ever-incomplete nature of the Symbolic, is as applicable to the possible flexibility of the never-perfect and never completely unified or dominant medico-legal system as by any other shaper of discourse. Even as it awkwardly polices Julieta’s transness, it loses control of her. The relationship between both authority and product, and between discourse and subject, typify Foucault’s study of biopolitics, introducing “a startling dissymmetry” between a sovereign power’s ability to terminate its subjects on the one hand, and influence their lives on the other (2003: 240).

The tension produced in the interaction between transgender women and the gatekeepers of medical discourse is hardly Julieta’s alone, in fact it is part of a historic phenomenon. Preciado himself recognizes the historical figure of Agnes who in the late 1950s and 1960s in the U.S.A. became a role model of Preciado’s own transgender agency as “a living pharmacopornographic biopolitical fiction” (2013: 388), manipulating the medico-legal system in order to get the transitioning-related treatment she desired. More broadly, Stone warns of depicting trans subjectivity as passive constructs of the medical industry. Responding to studies hostile to trans identity at the time, Stone says, “transsexuals are infantilized, considered too illogical or irresponsible to achieve true subjectivity, or clinically erased by diagnostic criteria” (229-230). This latter analysis by Stone underscores the historical dismissal of trans subjectivity as a modern, commodified

construction, or to paraphrase Preciado, an invented subject. Yet trans testimonies, including from autobiographies, memoirs, and personal accounts, reveal both an aspiration that can be supported within a medico-legal discourse, but which maintains a cynical distance from the support of such institutions.

Following in the tradition of other wary trans subjects such as Preciado when entering the medico-legal realm, Julieta's own experience of dealing with its profit-motive is pragmatic and pessimistic. Of her transitioning and depression, and the issue of economic clash of interests within the pharmaceutical industry, Julieta describes her "new HRT doctor who recommended I buy her herbal supplements to treat my depression and, when I hesitated, told me I'd have to book another two hundred dollar appointment before getting my prescription, leaving me without hormones for months" (48).

Consolidating Julieta's experience of the profit-driven nature of the medico-legal industry and its replication of oppressive social attitudes, are the circumstances of her companion and eventual lover, Magaly. Magaly is dependent on medicine to treat her condition of HIV+ and Julieta accordingly describes, after an activist meeting, the medico-legal system in relation to her lover's predicament. As with Berrout's other short stories, social commentary melds with the creative storytelling. The problems with healthcare in the protagonist's narrative include,

"cases of HIV discrimination by insurance companies and the grave rise in anti-retroviral costs and inpatient care they were preparing for under the impending Medicaid and Ryan White funding cuts, I was as attentive as I'd ever been as I heard Magaly deliver a statement as to the ways she'd personally struggled with getting insured after her diagnosis and paying her medical bills ... diagnosis rates

of HIV were rising fast as the unfolding wave of conservative reforms cut life-saving programs and allowed insurance companies to destroy the very idea of coverage for chronic conditions like HIV” (50).

In this description of her lover’s plight, Julieta critically highlights the medico-legal system in the U.S.A. It does not stop her or her lover attempting to access its resources, however, and this in turn potentially indicates a difference in power and privilege between Berrout and her protagonists on the one hand and Preciado on the other, who entirely rejects medical discourse in relation to his transness, arguably because he can afford to. Preciado concedes, for example, “If I’m able to take such a liberty at this time, it’s because I don’t need to go out and look for work, because I’m white, because I have no intention of having a bureaucratic relationship to the state” (61). Berrout’s protagonists, replicating the author’s own experiences as an economically disadvantaged trans woman of colour, lack the socio-economic resources to avoid a bureaucratic relationship with the state and the state-sanctioned medical services. Indeed, accessing the medical support services is potentially a matter of life and death for Julieta and Magaly; they lack the luxury to reject such a relationship of dependence even as they clearly are weary of it.

Exacerbating the unstable relationship between Julieta and Magaly and the medico-legal discourse is the social stigma potentially associated with such a discourse. Magaly’s loneliness until the end, it is implied, comes from her experience of suffering stigma and an anticipation of social rejection by being HIV+, which underlines connections between treatment and social attitudes. In a final dialogue with Julieta, she both expresses her exhaustion and receives reassurances of support and love that she

assumed to be permanently denied her, underlining a key theme in the story of the coming together of communities of the oppressed (56):

“I get depressed. I never clean. I get so tired and sick sometimes.”

“It’s perfect. We’ll do the cleaning together. I can hold you if you’re sad. I can cook if you’re tired. Wash your hair if you can’t manage. I’ll do all the things you need.”

“You’ll kiss me?”

“I’ll kiss you, I’ll kiss you, I’ll always kiss you.”

The exchange underlines how Julieta and Magaly are hardly passive products of the medico-legal system, nor do they depend upon the system for their identities or their way of making meaning about the world. For both, the system is not enough; they require support networks in the locality in order to survive, and in so doing, travel between different systems of discourse, from anti-establishment, for example, to establishment. Their subjectivity does draw on a mainstream discourse, therefore, but this does not comprehensively define either their subjectivity or their relationship to the discourse. We are reminded here of Lugones discussing how the woman of colour moves between different social sites as and when necessary,

“A ‘world’ in my sense may be an actual society, given its dominant culture’s description and construction of life ... But a ‘world’ can also be such a society given a nondominant, a resistant construction ... A ‘world’ need not be a construction of a whole society. It may be a construction of a tiny portion of a particular society. It may be inhabited by just a few people ... In a ‘world,’ some of the inhabitants may not understand or hold the particular construction of them

that constructs them in that ‘world.’ So, there may be ‘worlds’ that construct me in ways that I do not even understand. Or, it may be that I understand the construction, but do not hold it of myself. I may not accept it as an account of myself, a construction of myself. And yet, I may be animating such a construction” (2003: 87-88).

Lugones’s interpretation here sees the subject’s relationship to society and discourse as variable and fluid. This appears especially to be the case with a subject occupying multiple types of marginalization such as Berrout’s protagonist Julieta, as an economically disadvantaged trans woman of colour. In relation to the medico-legal system, Lugones’s analysis is useful for understanding Julieta, in terms of the statement, “I understand the construction, but do not hold it myself. I may not accept it as an account of myself, a construction of myself. And yet, I may be *animating* such a construction.” Similarly, as A.I. Julieta conforms to an identity that she is unaware of, and does not define her, as reflected in Lugones’s position: “So, there may be ‘worlds’ that construct me in ways that I do not even understand.” The multiple relationships that the subject has with different ‘worlds’ in other words highlights the diffuse identities of the protagonist in relation to various vectors of power. No single discourse can define her.

Julieta’s agency at the end is appropriately ambiguous. At the close of ‘Subject,’ even when reduced to the appearance of a machine, Julieta’s experience exceeds the limits of the discourse of machinery: “Subject JU/RA/001 pulses with awareness, suspended bodiless, a galaxy unto herself composed of a billion clusters of nerves threaded together with visions and longing and so much pain. Alive, alive, oh” (60).

Julieta evokes in her transcendence of a machine discourse a language of trans-becoming, a trans-cendence too of medical subjectivity. In particular, Eva Hayward's auto-ethnographic essay deconstructs via diary entries the psychosomatic euphoria of transitioning as a transsexual woman in her particular locality of San Francisco. She describes her transitioning as, "a reactivated, refreshed, and resourced sensuous body, a phenomenological topography of affects and percepts that are changed in order to feel transposed states of corporeality ... as energetic provocations in which expression and rhythm pulse among bodies: manifesting, emerging, transitioning" (2010: 226).

The sharing of language of pulsations and sensations between Hayward's account and Julieta's indicates the sensuous experience of transitioning, regardless of the sterile medical authorities officially authorizing the process. The language of artifice and passivity, for example, is redundant, and by extension, the protagonist Julieta is more than Preciado's "pharmacopornographic ... invention of a subject" (2013: 390, 36). It is here, arguably, that the joy – the *jouissance* – of her self-actualization, in the words of Hayward, her "trans-becoming" as a transgender female matters (2010: 226). For Hayward, this state of being involves transcending without exiting its discourse, as, "a material, psychical, sensual, and social self through corporeal, spatial, and temporal processes that trans-form the lived body. Rather than accounting for transsexuality as a psychological condition, or a purely sociological production, or even as some biological imperative" (2010: 226). Julieta's fusion of spiritual transcendence, personal liberation, and dynamic development of social networks, aligns with Hayward's partial self-analysis. Their transness is respectively unique and distinct, shaped partly by personal environments and circumstances, as well as the choices they make in response to them.

The medical element is only one aspect in a complex mélange of dynamic forces that they interact with.

ii. The Trans Female Voice in ‘Subject’: Subject as in under control, objectified

Subject, *adjective (before noun) – under the political control of another country or state: “subject peoples/states”*

Subject, *noun – a person, thing, or situation that is written about in a book, article, etc. or shown in a picture: “The mill by the bridge was the subject of an unfinished painting by JMW Turner.”*

Subject, *adjective (subject to something) – likely to have or experience a particular thing, especially something unpleasant: “You may be subject to additional bank charges for currency conversion.”*

In terms of strategies of control, few aspects in ‘Subject’ exemplify its dynamics as a text about a trans woman of colour more poignantly than the authorized suppression of memory. David Ebershoff’s middle-class-based *The Danish Girl* (2000), as a contrastive example, includes the author’s selective use of source material that presents the historical Lili Elbe as trying to suppress any memories of her past before her transition. Arguably, this cauterizing of Lili Elbe’s past produces a similar effect to the

memory erasure in ‘Subject,’ in its disempowering and even dehumanizing of the subject by removing a stabilizing force of subjectivity. Julieta, for example, is initially disconnected from social networks and ways of making sense of herself, her difference, and her oppression. In ‘Subject,’ the corporation is responsible for blocking the protagonist’s access to memories. It in turn is part of a larger, Trumpian, quasi-fascist culture in the story’s background. Sci-fi technology involving memory extraction called Memory-Host, which the protagonist believes is responsible for her inability to remember segments of her life, is tied to a corporate-political slogan, “Forget fast and return to work – let’s make America #1 again” (40).

At the level of postmodern analysis, the loss of memory also contributes to an evocation of the kind of capitalist-induced schizophrenia referred to by Fredric Jameson. In his adaptation of the work of Lacan, schizophrenia is analysed as “a breakdown in the signifying chain, that is, the interlocking syntagmatic series of signifiers which constitutes an utterance or a meaning” (1991: 26). Jameson develops this analysis in relation to “late capitalism” and the attempted undermining of metanarratives via the fragmentary, transient, and rootless hyper-individualization of society:

“If we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present, and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life. With the breakdown of the signifying chain, therefore, the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (26-27).

Personifying this effect at the outset in ‘Subject,’ Julieta expresses distress at the inability to remember: “Not that it didn’t eat away at me ... I felt a sense of detachment more than

anything else ... And my heart: a blank space, text cursor blinking against an empty background” (ibid).

Because of its ideological foundation within a white-centred society, the environment in ‘Subject’ offers far fewer options for its sci-fi / cyberpunk protagonist – a trans woman of colour – to resist than, for example, in the cyberpunk film *The Matrix*, where the denouement involves a spectacular war between humans and machines, as well as a climactic fight-to-the-death between the protagonist and his nemesis. In ‘Subject,’ the oppression depicted comes not only from those at the top – whose defeat would enable a conveniently clean decapitation of power – but ideologically, from the working-class neighbours next door. The latter’s transphobia is arguably as oppressive as any ideological form of control including a corporate kind, as Julieta remarks,

“But cis people prefer to live in a world where trans women don’t really exist, right? Where we couldn’t be their neighbor – not really, not her – because of the wrinkle that might cause in their way of thinking ... Better for them to act as if the new neighbor is just an interesting girl, a little too odd to ask to watch the kids, though she’s not beyond acknowledging by stopping to say hi and comment on the drought and curse climate change every so often” (37-38).

Julieta’s isolating, apartment-based, freelance work on the Internet parallels with the mode of work identified in Preciado’s critique of the medico-legal system, as well as Haraway’s description of late/advanced capitalist work patterns. Haraway describes the trend, emerging in the 1980s, as a “feminization of poverty – generated by the homework economy where stable jobs become the exception” (39). Accordingly, Julieta’s main source of income in the story involves her voluntarily being filmed for a six-month

period, “24/7,” providing “a VR webcam view into our lurid, miserable lives, anything they could extract at a minimum hourly wage (if they felt generous)” (46-47). A distinction here with other cyberpunk scenarios with white or anim  protagonists is Julieta’s dependence on low-wage, menial, online work. By contrast, in the narratives of the *Blade Runner* and *Matrix* franchises, as well as classic texts such as *Neuromancer* and *Ghost in the Shell*, the protagonist is either a successful agent of law enforcement or a gifted hacker with the capacity to bend cyberspace to their will. Such protagonists are consequently relatively empowered when dealing with futuristic technologies. As an economically disadvantaged trans woman of colour, Julieta’s relationship with technology appears little more than functional and she lacks the personal capacity to change anything substantially about her environment at a structural level. The oppressiveness of this capitalist system is a comprehensively cultural, socio-economic system that emerges from all around, and is seemingly accepted by the general populace. Echoing the pessimism of Jean Baudrillard and Slavoj  i ek, Fisher refers to a totemic movie that explores arguably white, Eurocentric anxieties, *Children of Men* and its theme of the Last Man: “the authoritarian measures that are everywhere in place could have been implemented within a political structure that remains, notionally, democratic” (6). For Fisher, the cultural malaise feeds the oppressiveness with a sense of helplessness: that society appears to be resigned to – indeed, politically even embraces – a narrative of declining conditions for the majority. For the protagonist Julieta, this malaise includes attitudes of transphobia and racism so pervasive it is difficult to know how to address.

With a socio-economic system that both demoralizes its populace and is simultaneously embraced by it, the mode of employment in ‘Subject’ similarly harbours

an economic climate both dissatisfying and tolerated. The voyeuristic, online form of employment suffered by Julieta conforms to Preciado's analysis of a fusion of online entertainment and work. Preciado describes it as a form of 'snuff politics,' in connection with the ubiquity of pornography on the Internet. While Julieta earns money by having her life streamed by webcam, Preciado notes the intrusive parallel of 'snuff movies' in which actors are apparently killed on screen blurring life with death and entertainment.

He says,

“rip away everything from life to the point of death and film the process, record it in writing and image, distribute it live over the Internet, making it permanently accessible in a virtual archive, an advertising medium on a global scale” (346).

With Julieta at her computer every day, “curating my social media accounts and roaming the sprawling fantasy worlds of my VR games” (36), there is also a parallel with Baudrillard's description of how the computer induces “a kind of immersion, a sort of umbilical relation” (2002: 177). 'Subject' encompasses in this portrayal of Julieta's work patterns an Internet-era anxiety of physical inertia and offline isolation, characterized not only by Baudrillard but by Žižek's equally monolithic and pessimistic analysis:

“This moral vacuum is but one dimension of the apocalyptic times in which we live. It is easy to see how each of the three processes of proletarianization ... refer to an apocalyptic point: ecological breakdown, the biogenetic reduction of humans to manipulable machines, total digital control over our lives” (2011: 327).

Yet such a position on the submerging of the 'passive' subject does not appear to convey the experience of Julieta completely, who yearns to break off from her isolated work patterns. Again, the factor of community and support network is underestimated in

postmodern analyses that fail to acknowledge the gaps in the Symbolic and in discourse that allow for the production of alternative narratives and discourses of resistance. Magaly's increasing intervention as a love interest characterizes this dynamic of alternatives, with narrative implications for Julieta's growing autonomy. As Magaly says to Julieta, in the process breaking away the control wielded by Rachel and the corporation: "I'd take care of you. Get you a shift at the bar or something. You could stop relying on that VR shit, it scares me – that research they're doing sounds so evil. Someday we'd get a place together" (55).

The isolating of Julieta, and the development of her autonomy paradoxically by becoming part of a community, highlights a more profound political subtext at play in 'Subject.' The enforced mnemonic barrier 'Memory Host,' can be seen not only as a mode of general control by the corporation but also a racialized – as well as cisheteropatriarchal – form of oppression for a people divorced from a legitimizing history. It is here, though, that we depart from Fisher's conception of Capitalist Realism, in which the oppressiveness of neoliberal society cannot be understood without also understanding the significance of racism. To return to the position of Mwaluko, "I don't think the Western model – that single-issue model – is *ever* going to work for people of color." Berrout's story, like her writing generally, and in alignment with the testimonies of Janet Mock and Lovemme Corazon, sees economic injustice in relation to a racial one. A community – and a politics – that does not recognize these different forms of oppression, is incomplete.

The significance of the 'memory-wipe' in 'Subject as a metaphor not only for the neoliberal climate, but racially too, is reflected in bell hooks's analysis, "Memory

sustains a spirit of resistance. Too many red and black people live in a state of forgetfulness, embracing a colonized mind so that they can better assimilate into the white world” (191). The memory block to which Julieta is subjected can be seen not only as a transgender-based mode of oppression and isolation but as an additional form of control of the racialized trans subject, indicating the enduring impact of other historic oppressions within a futuristic setting. Most apparently, the presence of Rachel as the white corporate manager and creator of Julieta underlines how race, rather than gender or the medico-legal establishment, is the greater signifier of perceived threat: “Not a white room, but a white woman sits at its center, immersed in virtual space” (56). The A.I. subjects of the corporation’s programme, meanwhile, have been constructed with race and transgender identity as the vital ingredients. Accordingly, a scene is described, in which,

“The light dims and everyone moves instinctively toward the surface of the table where grids of footage play: interviews where black and brown trans women sign page after page of waivers and agree to the beetle implants that will map their minds in exchange for small payments” (59).

In an ironic summary of the corporation’s accomplishment in creating a colonized and submissive A.I. identity, the narrative draws a parallel with the beginning of the European colonizing of the Americas: “The year is 2021, and perhaps only in 1492 was there greater cause for celebration in the bowels of hell” (60). The corporation is viewed not with the significance that Preciado gives it, as a manipulator of subjectivity on a national scale, but primarily as an enabler of racism and slavery.

In so doing, the story's social commentary on race relations in the U.S.A. highlights the intersectional nature of the oppressions at work: there is not one narrative of oppression at play, but several. In relation to the racialized one, we return to the concept of necropolitics by Mbembe, with its focus on the power dynamics of race/racism in which "race has been the ever present shadow in Western political thought and practice, especially when it comes to imagining the inhumanity of, or rule over, foreign peoples" (2003: 17). In 'Subject,' Julieta's slave-like role has been assigned because of her status as a trans woman of colour, emphasizing her expendability within a racialized hierarchy. The social stigma of transness contributes to an additional form of disadvantage that potentially dissolves social networks and solidarity, rendering her ever more a slave. As Mbembe says, the slave is "kept alive but in a *state of injury*, in a phantom-like world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity ... Slave life, in many ways, is a form of death-in-life" (21). Julieta, as the protagonist in 'Subject,' exists doubly disenfranchised. It is only through the consciousness-raising relationship she begins to develop with Magaly that she becomes increasingly liberated, highlighting how, unlike the neoliberal-conformist text *A Fantastic Woman*, salvation depends not on individual brilliance but the company of others against racial and economic oppression.

Conclusion

To the background of landscapes dominated by inhumane, all-powerful corporations protected by a violent, military-like police force and its carceral justice, the Hispanic-American protagonists of 'Mansion' and 'Subject,' respectively Aurora and

Julieta, battle directly against a variety of forces. These include an individualized isolation, dismissive white-centred LGBT+ organizations, economic and racialized oppression at the level of housing and employment options, and the medico-legal system. Arguably, only the last of these is addressed by organizations such as the HRC, highlighting in turn the value of Berrout's storytelling as a wake-up call to any reader occupying such spaces. It also provides a shared acknowledgment and form of awareness-raising for those uncomfortable with the limited policy-agenda and vision of mainstream trans-activist spaces. Yet the voices that emerge from Aurora and Julieta, and most explicitly from Berrout in her essays and articles are critical of far larger entities, from banks to the police, and the many-tentacled forms of the prison and military industrial complexes. These are voices so at odds with the U.S.A.'s own rhetoric, whether it be Ronald Reagan's 'City on a Hill' or Bill Clinton's 'Place Called Hope,' that it effectively appears to call for a new iteration of the U.S.A. as a social, economic, and political entity.

The scale of frustration and anti-capitalist ambition is vast, but these represent at least some of the yearnings of communities of the dispossessed, whose members feel they have no stake in the nation called the U.S.A. It is here that we see the significance of the fracture between different trans communities, based on race/ethnicity and class, and it is worth asking how co-operation can occur between such contrasting sets of worldviews and divergent trans communities.

On the fitness of the U.S.A. or any country in the Anglophone Global North to be a sovereign nation, Paisley Currah's analysis on the relationship between the nation state and trans identity addresses some of the ideologies at play. Currah highlights, for

example, the liberal underpinnings of the United States recognizable in the rhetorical output and activism of Sarah McBride. Currah describes this liberal position that perceives when “governments have denied rights based on distinctions of race and gender, among others, in the past [it] is an unfortunate historical contingency, one that betrayed the principle of equality and that has now been, or soon will be, rectified” (2014: 197). Contrary to this position of the liberal State as “a neutral umpire,” Currah addresses the perspective “of the Left” recognizable in Berrout’s work. This involves “the maldistribution of equality” in connection with the still more terrifying conception by Thomas Hobbes, of “The Leviathan state’s terrible concentrated authority to impose sanctions (death, imprisonment, fines).” It can also be summed up by Max Weber’s definition of the state as “A human community that (successfully) claims *the monopoly of the legitimate physical violence* within a particular given territory” (Currah, 199). The divide between these visions of the State is stark – as stark, indeed, as the difference in perspective held by Berrout and arguably Corazon, on the one hand, and McBride and mainstream LGBT+ organizations on the other. Currah argues that both types of positions risk being reductive, at least in relation to trans rights. Currah argues that “much of what states do – regulating the health, safety, and public welfare through myriad regulations, rules, decisions, practices – does not reach the threshold of judicial violence, even if those actions are ultimately undergirded by its threat” (199). Of the U.S.A., Currah says, this includes the difference between particular U.S. states, and it can be argued that in Berrout’s short story ‘Subject’ especially, we see how liberation occurs within communities in spite of the State’s combination of centreless distance and militarized notion of public order. Yet the Hobbesian image that Berrout paints of the U.S.A. is more

than just imagination; testimonies like that of Berrout provide real-life evidence that being a socio-economically disadvantaged black or brown person in the U.S.A. is genuinely to experience an endangered mode of living, the “New Jim Crow” of Michelle Alexander’s thesis (2013). Currah says, “Fetishizing a generalized idea of the state and its terrifying or redemptive power (depending on one’s perspective) can obscure what is actually happening in the local, micro, particular sites where most public authority is exercised” (199). Perhaps in relation to trans healthcare, but the mass protests of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and the increasingly documented images of the deaths of black and brown people at the hands of police violence, as well as the violence meted out disproportionately by militarized riot police against BLM protests, highlight the severity of the threat to black and brown lives, and by association, QTPOC communities. Understanding the potentially selective nature of the justice system within neoliberal society, and how these modes of discrimination occur outside of the benign narratives of the neoliberal imaginary, appears pivotal if mainstream trans activist communities are to at least attempt to represent disempowered trans people, as well as the privileged ones.

Chapter 6

Documentary: the Transgender Gaze and the Value of Community

Introduction

To refer back to Chapter 3, *A Fantastic Woman* as a fictional movie constructs for the audience a narrative that typifies Stefanie van de Peer's idea of a connection, with the audience "open to new experiences and seeing things from others' perspectives," with the objective of building "subjectivity, sympathy and solidarity." Yet it does so with a certain kind of transgender woman, and within a particular cinematic genre. Cis-passing, ambitious, still relatively young, and talented in the fine arts, Marina as the "rather glamorous, very beautiful young woman" of Helen O'Hara's description (2018) is an urban figure whose life arguably aligns with her cinema-going audiences in the Anglophone Global North, with a range of possibilities in front of her. As a work of fiction, *A Fantastic Woman* is also bound by a set of implicit delineations. Contrasting fictional movies with documentaries, Michael Chanan says,

"The documentary image has a quality or dimension that is different from fiction, because it carries a determinable link with the historical world. Fiction we know to be invented and set up for the camera, whereas documentary consists of scenes drawn from the social and physical world that exists independently of the camera

– that is to say, the same world that the viewer moves around and belongs to, not its imaginary double” (2007: 4).

Chanan’s analysis is reflected by the central elements of *A Fantastic Woman*. The story is “invented and set up” not only through the music, dialogue, setting and characterization but also the casting, in order to both generate unambiguous sympathy and reflect van de Peer’s notion of ‘intersubjectivity’ between its protagonist and the cis-majority audience. Thematically, it also aligns with the urban narratives implicitly reflected by the writing of trans commentators such as Susan Stryker, Julia Serano and Sonny Nordmarken, including Serano’s desire to see a breaking free of particular tropes. Structurally, finally, it is also a story shaped by what John Yorke identifies as the “Beginning, middle, end” of the “Three act structure,” involving “incident ... crisis ... climax, resolution” (2013: 24). Citing the writer David Mamet, Yorke says of its supposed universality, “Dramatic structure is not an arbitrary – or even a conscious – invention. It is an organic codification of the human mechanism for ordering information. Event, elaboration, denouement; thesis, antithesis, synthesis” (2013: 28). On constructing a way of ‘seeing’ trans women according to van de Peer’s conception, *A Fantastic Woman* arguably does a lot of the work for the audience with such conventions, accommodating cis and transgender ways of seeing gender according to ideological expectations in the Anglophone Global North.

Ostensibly, documentaries, as noted by Michael Renov, are based less around the implicitly satisfying, dramatic three part structure and its resolution than a focus on the “fundamental, often overlapping tendencies” that include the objectives “To record, reveal, or preserve” (2014: 74). In viewing the product of such a genre, expectations accordingly alter and audiences, consciously or otherwise, will activate a mental schema

that allows the viewing experience to interact with the documentary text, with, in the words of Chanan, its “scenes drawn from the social and physical world that exists independently of the camera.” Yet mainstream documentaries on trans identity, those for example shown by popular online providers like *Netflix*, also appear to conform to tropes and structures that mirror fictional representations. To take the *Netflix* documentary *Mala Mala* (2014), which follows the lives of several trans women and drag queens in Puerto Rico, the primary focus appears to be on trans female sex workers. The Male Gaze shapes much of the footage, including a focus on the bottom implants of arguably the head of the collective, as revealed in the opening shot of the film’s promotional trailer (*Mala Mala trailer*). The documentary poster confirms how the documentary caters for the Male Gaze with highly sexualized poses, some naked, by the trans women and drag queens in the images. Along with the primary focus on sexualized bodies, the narrative loosely follows the ‘Three act structure’ identified by Yorke, concluding in positive endings, for the sex-workers through the legislation of rights, and for their organizer with a posting to New York City in the USA as a spokesperson on trans rights.

Documentaries on the lives of those outside the Anglophone Global North, including socio-economically marginalized trans women, need not conform to this conventional trans-based documentary filmmaking. Citing Fernando Solanas, Paul Willemsen describes three different types of documentary-making, in acknowledgment of the tradition since the 1960s of ‘Third Cinema’ that researchers such as van de Peer also reference in their work for its radical possibilities. He notes how,

“First cinema expresses imperialist, capitalist, bourgeois ideas. Big monopoly capital finances big spectacle cinema as well as authorial and informational

cinema ... Second cinema is often nihilistic, mystifactory. It runs in circles. It is cut off from reality ... Third Cinema is the expression of a new culture and of social changes. Generally speaking, Third Cinema gives an account of reality and history” (182).

To exemplify Solanas’s analysis, *Mala Mala* can be said to conform to First Cinema documentary making in its ideologically neoliberal underpinning. It combines an emphasis on pursuing legal rights for the sex workers with a materially rewarding ending for some of its trans and drag queen subjects with placements in the continental U.S.A., the ultimate neoliberal utopia. To refer back to Lisa Duggan’s analysis of homonormativity, the trans women contribute to the validation of “a ‘neutral’ state ... [where] ‘you can do what you want’ (the concession to privacy) and ‘you can be who you are’ (the concession of identity), but ‘you can’t spread it around on MY dime.’” In addition, the trans woman who arguably conforms most to cis-passing beauty standards as the head of the collective is able to escape the world of the sex worker for a job in New York. In its own way, her arc is not unlike Marina’s in *A Fantastic Woman*: she is the ‘right kind of trans woman,’ being ambitious, articulate, confident, and sexually attractive in a cis-passing way. *Mala Mala* is arguably the trans documentary *par excellence* for meeting the Male Gaze, combining within its several individual narratives a portrayal that blends ideas of the trans woman as hypersexualized, and the notion that a trans woman can escape a life of poverty and sex work if she has the resourcefulness and attractively cis-passing looks and demeanour.

An anti-neoliberal trans documentary: *Miss María, Skirting the Mountain*

It is against this context that *Miss María, Skirting the Mountain* (*Señorita María, la falda de la montaña*) (2017) appears as a strikingly different kind of trans-based documentary. Because of the gaps that appear between the film's promotional materials, including poster, trailer, and blurb, with the documentary itself, and crucially, the subsequent impact on its participants, different audiences and 'gazes' must be accounted for. Encapsulating First, Second, and Third Cinema within these different layers of the film, it is a documentary that highlights the added complexity of a type of filmmaking that portrays the lives of real people, with implications for how we understand the complexity of representing and seeing trans women.

i. Promotional materials navigating a Male/Cisgender Gaze, the deceptive *homonational* signification, and the urban-rural culture clash

At the outset, *Miss María, Skirting the Mountain* (*MMSM*) appears to be a documentary film that aligns with Solanas's analysis of either First Cinema as "authorial and informational cinema" or Second Cinema with its qualities of being "mystifactory ... It runs in circles. It is cut off from reality." The promotional blurb indicates how the documentary is likely to conform to one or both of these forms of cinema, an anti-modern curio with the emphasis on tragedy and isolation:

"Boavita is a rural, conservative Catholic village embedded in the Andes and frozen in time. In the foothills of these mountains lives Miss María Luisa Fuentes.

She is 45 years old and was born a boy. Behind what appears to be just another life mired in gender and identity conflict, lies a bitter, unimaginable family history, its deepest roots seasons with hatred. The horrors of rural life in Colombia with all its religious morality have done nothing but increase the power of this solitary soul” (*edfilmfest*, 2018).

The wording of a trans life “mired in gender and identity conflict” amid the “horrors of rural life in Colombia” serve as a warning of the distressing nature of some elements of the film. The story, on the surface, constructs both an ominously tragic transgender narrative and an exotic one, bringing into conflict the secularity, modern technologies, and individualism of the audience of the nominally Protestant-majority, Anglophone Global North against a conservatively Catholic, pre-industrial village life in the Global South. By this clash, the promotion can be said to exemplify what Aren Aizura describes as “twenty-first-century exceptionalist homonationalism, wherein transgender rights and recognition are understood to be the accomplishments of a modern West, opposed to a queerphobic or transphobic premodern and barbarous other” (2018: 79). The blurb especially, while setting up this expectation, arguably performs a disservice to the film, given that the subject, Miss María Luisa Fuentes, to be described henceforth in this section as Miss María, ultimately does not signify only tragedy but also warmth and indefatigability. In the film itself, her transness or gender nonconformity is not the source of a crisis for her; rather her crisis is centred on the reaction of her community to her, a theme that questions the individualistic focus of much trans documentary-making such as *Mala Mala*.

At this point, and in view of the exoticizing of Miss María's circumstances in the promotional text and the potential binary it constructs between Global North and South, the backdrop is also worth comparing with rural settings within the Anglophone Global North. Stories of the abuse of trans people in fact abound in the Anglophone Global North too, although these are often depicted as individualized crimes and tragedies. In the U.S.A., the murders in rural or small-town locations of trans people, furthermore, such as Brandon Teena and Gwen Araujo, focus on the identities of the perpetrators rather than the broader ideologies at play (Halberstam, 2013; Bettcher, 2013). In the U.K. meanwhile, and to take as an example familiar to me as a trans woman who grew up closeted in Wales in the 1980s and 1990s, it is worth noting Daryl Leeworthy's observation. He says, "Time and again, the social and cultural atmosphere in many parts of Wales seemed inimical to living lives differently from the norm, and the migrant's trail took away those who felt oppressed" (2019: xx). One particularly harrowing story from the Welsh rural setting, recorded in the research of Norena Shopland about the intersex case of Linda Roberts, highlights the potential parallel with the one exoticised in the promotional materials of *MMSM*:

"In 1997 Linda moved to North Wales, to the remote village of Penrhyndeudraeth in Snowdonia. However there was to be no welcome in the hills. A group of around thirty people were intent on driving her out as they perceived her as a man dressed as a woman and defined her as a 'pervert'. She was spat at, had stones thrown at her and her windows smashed. In the year the article was published she had been assaulted, kicked, stamped on and had bones broken. The police, far

from helpful, responded with ‘What do you expect, a person like you moving to a village like this?’” (2017: 156).

The experience of Roberts as a visibly gender nonconforming woman in rural Wales indicates the parallel for trans people in particular areas within the Anglophone Global North as well as the Global South. Yet the documentary’s blurb presents Miss María’s plight as connected to her remote environment in rural Colombia, itself arguably a symbol for the Global South’s place in the Anglophone Global North’s imaginary as a ‘Heart of Darkness.’ In this sense, it evokes a familiar chain of significations, replicated for example in the Indiana-Jones-esque film *Romancing the Stone* (1984) or the grittier and more contemporary *Triple Frontier* (2019), with both sharing vistas of steaming jungles, impoverished villages, narcotics syndicates, and displaced, endangered protagonists from the Anglophone Global North. As such, we see how trans identity in this promotional depiction is also racialized: not only policed by the Male and Cisgender Gaze, but by a White Gaze and its colourist bias. While the face and gaze of Marina dominates the promotional imagery for *A Fantastic Woman*, Miss María as a darker, older, uncannier figure, is obscured:



Promotional posters for the documentary *Miss Maria, Skirting the Mountain* (2017); Netflix documentaries *Mala Mala* (2014) and *The Pearl of Africa* (2016).

Enigmatically, the poster image contrasts with other trans documentary promotions and is indicative of how *MMSM* is a different kind of documentary to that viewed in more familiar, mainstream channels in the Anglophone Global North. This includes the sexualized images promoting *Mala Mala*. Another *Netflix* documentary, *The Pearl of Africa*, captures the calm but concerned expression typical of the central figure, the twenty-something Cleopatra Kambugu, whose gender transitioning and romantic relationship occur in Uganda. Yet the face of Miss María, the subject of *MSMM*, is hidden from view, the Male/Cisgender Gaze temporarily resisted.

The trailer to *MMSM* reveals a possible reason for the poster's positioning. Allied to the lined and masculine, make-up-less face of the forty-five-year-old Miss María are her opening words, "God made all kinds, ugly and beautiful. But everything is beautiful to Him" (*MMSM* Trailer, 2017: 0.03). The words arguably anticipate the anti-climax of the Male/Cisgender Gaze for the 'right kind of trans woman' more apparent in the other, *Netflix* documentaries, warning that not all trans women are transitioning, cis-passing twenty- or thirty-something figures stylized for the implicitly urban, public eye and Male/Cisgender Gaze. In this respect, Miss María can be said to occupy the domain of the Uncanny that unsettles the Male/Cisgender Gaze, in alignment with what Raewyn Connell and Rebecca Pearse describe as the kind of "contradictory embodiment [that] are central in transsexual women's lives" (2016: 109). The subject of *MMSM*, Miss María, furthermore, has not undergone treatment to alter this 'contradictory embodiment.' Hers are not the circumstances of a neoliberal trans narrative, in which the basic elements are in place to enable liberation via invisibility in various bodily and socio-economic forms.

There is, in this mode of representation of transness, a potential shift away from First Cinema towards a destabilizing of assumptions of LGBT+ identity, their encountered oppressions, and the expected solutions via policy-making, laws, mobility, and online-fostered networks.



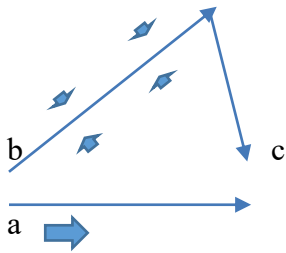
Images from the documentary and two subsequent TV shows catching up with Miss María (left to right, starting top):

- 1) *Miss María reflecting on deeply upsetting information the filmmakers have discovered about her parentage. It is arguably the one mis-step in the film.*

- 2) *From the documentary: Miss María performing labouring duties in a field.*
- 3) *A typical scene from the documentary showing Miss María as an individual looking small and insignificant against the mountains, pastures, and forests as she goes about her daily life.*
- 4) *From a post-documentary interview: Miss María with director Rubén Mendoza, their rapport and Miss María's trust and affection evident.*
- 5) *From a post-documentary TV show: Miss María gazing thoughtfully into the camera, the kind of close-up missing from the original documentary, implying Miss María's increasing comfort around the attention of others.*
- 6) *From the post-documentary TV show: Miss María with a glamorous-looking pair of sunglasses, sharing her new-found sense of happiness at being part of a community, stating, "I won, before God, I have won."*
- 7) *From the post-documentary TV show: a vox-pops interview with a local resident of Boavita, Manuel Hernandez, expressing his affection for Miss María.*
- 8) *From the post-documentary TV show: a vox-pops interview with a community leader, Irma Sandoval, discussing how Miss María embodies the rich but potentially underappreciated life of the Colombian peasantry.*
- 9) *From the post-documentary TV show: Miss María returning to her tasks, here milking a cow.*

ii. **The non-structure of the documentary**

In spite of the tropes of homonationalism and the Male/Cisgender Gaze implied in the promotional texts, the documentary itself defies the kind of storytelling convention associated with trans narratives, lacking any significant progression, arc, or resolution. It begins with Miss María working as a subsistence labourer, performing various types of agricultural work. It ends with her walking alone along a country road, continuing with her work, smiling while being filmed, at both a material level and in terms of her relationship with her community no different to before. It is at one level a rejection of the three-part concept of drama as identified by Yorke. Similarly it could be argued that Miss María's lack of narrative arc challenges the structure of storytelling according to the 'Fichtean curve,' in which 'a,' as the normal course of action, is rejected (Gardner, 1991: 187). *MMSM* is essentially about a subject continuing her normal course of action, involving her daily routines of work and visits to church.



a = normal course of action; b = course of action taken bravely + climax/denouement; c = denouement and result

In evidence of the film's alterity, even as a documentary, other twenty-first-century trans documentaries do appear to include a recognizable narrative arc as identified by Yorke.

As mentioned already, *Mala Mala* includes the increasing activism and solidarity of the trans female sex workers and their eventual success in calling for rights. In *The Pearl of Africa*, the documentary concludes with the subject Cleopatra getting gender reassignment surgery in Thailand, and leaving Uganda for asylum with her partner. By degrees, these replicate the discernible energetic structure of a novel, and for that matter cinematic fiction, summarized by John Gardner as possessing a ‘beginning, middle, and end’ (1991: 186). There appears, as part of this, to be at least a favourable change in circumstances in both *Mala Mala* and *The Pearl of Africa*, if not the dramatic denouement expected of a fictional narrative in which the viewer, as Gardner notes, “understands everything and everything is symbolic” (194). Arguably, the closest *MMSM* comes to a moment of revelation concerns research at least partially conducted, it appears, by the film team to discover details about Miss María’s original parents, revealed to her during the film. It is this element that is referred to in the film’s blurb, “Behind what appears to be just another life mired in gender and identity conflict, lies a bitter, unimaginable family history, its deepest roots seasons with hatred” (*edfilmfest*, 2017). Yet this narrative thread is also, arguably, the least convincing part of the documentary, both in the obvious distress it causes Miss María, and in its apparent failure to bring some form of resolution or change to her life. The documentary’s end, showing her briskly at work along the country road, suggests her life continues, much the same as before, and is the more fitting close to a slice of life where little in the daily routine of tasks appears to change.

The lack of dramatic action or development, according to the director Rubén Mendoza, is intentional. He explains his preference for an organic approach to the

filming, thereby avoiding the kind of tropes of romance and feminization/transition we see in other documentaries such as *Mala Mala* and *The Pearl of Africa*. Similar to Sebastien Lelio's *transgenre* approach to *A Fantastic Woman*, Mendoza toys with the Spanish-language wordplay of gender/genre to define his own style with the documentary. He says, "A lot of people have taken action on the issue of gender/genre ... I am bad at gender/genre ... cinematic genre/gender, and also about thinking 'okay, let's make a movie about genre/gender for this or that community'" (Mendoza, 2017). In terms of storytelling strategy, Mendoza emphasises the 'organic' over a beginning-middle-end:

"The direction was whatever she was sharing with us, how much she opened the door to us, and how much her neighbours opened the door to us. So, what one has to do when you do cinema in general, and even more when you're making a documentary, is to not shut down the way life can intrude on the movie, because first of all, that is impossible, but also it will end up being very inorganic and will hinder the process. Secondly, because life itself will always reveal much richer paths."

Overall, and with the exception of the arguably contrived information about her parents that intrudes on her life, the film reflects Mendoza's approach, producing a documentary that convincingly appears as a slice of life where nothing much changes. This underscores another reason for the possible low profile of the documentary internationally. Not only do we get a trans woman who fails to conform to a cis-female ideal according to the Male/Cis Gaze, as conceptualized by contemporary iterations of the 'Good Transsexual,' but also a narrative structure, such as it is, that fails to depict

Miss María's life with sufficient drama or development, including a sense of climax. This includes in relation to romance, a key element in *The Pearl of Africa* and to some degree *Mala Mala*. As with the blurb, the trailer for *MMSM* deceptively suggests the possibility of drama, on this occasion in relation to companionship. The final words, spoken by Miss María almost pleadingly, suggest a resolution to come in the actual film: "It's as if I didn't even exist in this world. Lord, I know you're out there, and I'm telling you this from my heart. My beautiful Father, I don't want to be alone anymore" (1.47). Yet the film itself, reflective of its slice-of-life nature, reveals no romantic companionship at the documentary's end.

In contrast, therefore, to *A Fantastic Woman* and its packaging as a trans movie, or *Mala Mala* as a mainstream documentary of trans lives outside the Anglophone Global North, Miss María's self-perception of her gender identity might in fact be the profoundest difference of the documentary. We learn that Miss María was raised by her grandmother after being abandoned by her real parents shortly after birth (Emblin, 2017). She appears during childhood to have identified with, and presented as, female, and at eighteen years of age, adopted the name of Maria "in reverence to the Virgin Mary" (Emblin). This latter detail is indicative of the difference of the discourse overall; Miss María makes no reference to transitioning or surgery, seeming to be either unaware of such possibilities or disinterested in pursuing them. Without an explicitly transgender/transitioning narrative, Miss María, along with her acquaintances, appears to have made sense of her transness, and her life in general, through Catholicism. Two spoken excerpts from the film appear in the trailer to reveal the discomfort of the Catholic-based community with Miss María's identity through this religious discourse.

One middle-aged woman says with noticeable mirth, “All his life, people have discriminated against him. Although it’s less now. They used to say such things! ‘Two or three of us should together and raise his skirt and whip him good!’” (*MMSM* trailer, 2017: 0.43). Another, a companion who appears to be Miss María’s closest approximation to a friend, comments on Miss María’s isolation, “I think that’s the reason. Because of the way he used to dress. That’s why I say it was a demon! An evil spirit” (1.05). A dramatic moment in the documentary follows one such pronouncement, with the companion claiming Miss María was formerly possessed by a demon who tormented her with fits. She describes Miss María having been rescued from these fits by an exorcism performed by a priest. Soon after this revelation in the documentary, we see Miss María lying unconscious in a field. Later at the town hospital, she discovers she has epilepsy. Without intervention, the documentary leaves it to the audience to see the gap between the ‘devil’ narrative projected upon the subject by her community, and the medical-based reality. A mounting distress at the community’s attitudes towards her is arguably elicited from the audience.

iii. **Against neoliberal narratives: a vital connection to community**

The lack of sympathy of those of her community in Boavita is perhaps the most distressing element of the documentary, a situation exacerbated by Miss María’s apparent lack of options but to remain in her location. Writing on the plight of transgender refugees, B Camminga cites the work of Hannah Arendt in identifying the necessity of community as the foundation of a bearable existence. Camminga says, “once

experiencing this first loss of community, life simply becomes something that is prolonged through charity, making the second loss – that of security – a near-inevitability” (2019: 209). The consequences of the unbearable absence of assimilation into a community, as Camminga says, “hinders survival, including the ability to find stable employment and housing” (213). In *MMSM*, we see what appears to be a barely tolerable community connection, one in which companions refer to Miss María without affection as a man, where in one scene we see children shouting abuse at her in the street. Her refuge, a hut-like abode in the mountain’s foothills, adds to the sense of subsistence living. As Miss María herself says, “For the people of the village, I don’t exist in this world ... They told me it was best not to talk to anyone ... Some villagers even contacted the local priest to exorcise the demon in me” (Emblin). Her social isolation may be survivable but it appears hardly pleasant for her. She expresses regret at the failure to attain a socially and privately validating, heteronormative life as experienced by other, cisgender women, one she desires for herself but acknowledges as impossible. “I would have loved to get married and have children,” she says in an interview after the documentary (Emblin).

Miss María’s dependence on her community in rural Boavita is an explicit departure from the life depicted in *A Fantastic Woman*. Recalling Camminga’s research on transgender refugees, the demands of uprooting and effectively losing what community she has could expose Miss María to an even more traumatic and insecure mode of living. Freedom to depart, then, is arguably conditional on several factors such as economic position, social capital, and employment and housing issues. Exploring the issue of rights in relation to hostile environment, Judith Butler analyses the violence of

social divergence. Citing the work of Adorno, Butler describes a clash between “the universal interest and the particular interest, the interests of particular individuals” (2005: 5). She then asks, “What are the conditions under which this divergence takes place? [Adorno] refers to a situation in which ‘the universal’ fails to agree with or include the ‘rights’ of the individual” (2005: 5). It is a situation vaguely discernible in *MMSM*, but where the problems far exceed a lack of rights. By contrast and more in keeping with Butler’s analysis, in relation to transgender rights in the U.S.A., Emi Koyama in her influential *Transfeminist Manifesto* presents a central principle, that “each individual has the right to define her or his own identities and to expect society to respect them” (2003: 245). Yet this principle already exists in Colombia with a legal basis, given that in 2015, legislation was enacted to allow transgender people to legally update how “their name and gender are registered on government identification cards” (Franco, 2015). Again, given Miss María’s informal status among the Colombian peasantry, it is worth asking how such legal conditions would alter the isolation and exclusion she encounters pre-documentary. On the relationship between the film and an audience in the Anglophone Global North, a quality of *MMSM* is its exposure of the limits of LGBT+ discourse, including activism and policy-making, in relation to the especially rural lives of those like Miss María. What appears to be more helpful to Miss María’s quality of life isn’t LGBT+-focused legislation, but consciousness-raising within her community, as the consequences of the documentary make clear.

iv. **Post-documentary developments: the backwash effect and the parallels between *MMSM* with the dynamics of the Theatre of the Oppressed, Playback Theatre and Autobiographical Theatre**

An integral, if arguably unintended, element of the documentary is its subsequent impact on Miss María's life within the community, as revealed in several follow-up TV shows in Colombia. Approximately one year after the original film, Miss María says to an interviewer,

“Before, nobody cared about me, my lady. But now, thanks to my God, to whom by the way I pray every day for these things that God gave to me, now I have good friendships, good male friends, good female friends, who support me on everything” (Fuentes, 2018).

The development of this strikingly improved situation for Miss María in her community appears to have been caused by the original documentary, and its impact on many of the inhabitants of Boavita who evidently watched the film. Stimulating and provoking reflections and responses, the documentary has acted inadvertently as an exercise in consciousness-raising. In this respect, it replicates the tradition of several types of community-based theatre, including the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) of the Brazilian dramaturgist Augusto Boal, as well as the Playback Theatre (PT) pedagogy of Jonathan Fox, and Autobiographical Theatre (AT), the latter which can be said to be evident already in much consciousness-raising transgender theatre in the Anglophone Global North. As described by Hannah Fox and Abigail Leeder, ‘AT,’

“was inspired in part by women’s consciousness-raising groups, in which women-only circles came together to express their anger, frustrations, and dissatisfactions with the role that society had defined them ... Dialogue around gender, race, class, and other instances of oppression is a central component to this style of performance” (102).

The documentary’s ability to affect the inhabitants of Boavita appears to include the kind of function of consciousness-raising that combines the goals of PT and AT, which as Fox and Leeder says, “both focus on telling individual personal stories to create an emotional bond with the audience” (101). Citing PT’s practitioner Jonathan Fox, they note the kind of impact similar to the one by Mendoza’s documentary: “The personal and emotional elements of PT and AT create a space for vulnerability, empathy, and trust, which in turn builds community; through the sharing of personal stories there becomes a room full of ‘neighbours and not strangers.’” At a more structural level, Fox and Leeder also note the complementary role of Boal’s influential TO, with such variations as ‘Forum Theatre’ in which “a scene depicting an act of oppression is presented; the scene is then replayed and the audience is invited to stop the action and step in as spectators to improvise solutions with the intention of changing the situational outcome” (104). It appears from interviews with Boavita’s inhabitants that similar, though impromptu processes of reflection and action have followed. The majority of a series of vox pops in a post-documentary TV show reveals perspectives which are generally very different from those in the original documentary. Eduard Medina confirms the educational impact of the documentary on the community:

“I think there are divided opinions regarding her. There’s people that defend her a lot, who thanks to this documentary, since all her tragic past came out, and all the hard things that she had to go through, I think there’s a lot of people who felt really bad for her, or felt a really personal bond with her, because that documentary also shows a lot of cultural customs, the landscapes of the people, it is really a very deep documentary” (Medina, 2018).

Medina’s perspective is notable for the local knowledge he expresses; his is not the view of an audience member from the Anglophone Global North but from Boavita itself. Miss María is accordingly not just a gender-nonconforming person but a vital element of his world. Similarly, the community figure Irma Sandoval says of Miss María’s significance in the fabric of rural life, “Miss María reflects the reality of the Colombian peasant, the hardship that is allocated to the peasant in Colombia” (Sandoval, 2018). These perspectives are coloured by local sentiment and an appreciation that Miss María is in fact a distinctive presence to cherish within their community.

The documentary’s backwash effect extends to a more flexible understanding of sex/gender. On the one hand, and viewed through an explicitly cisheteronormative discourse, Azusena Rosas maintains the kind of attitude of discomfort characteristic of the original documentary: “For me as a mother, if I have to explain to my child that she is a man who turned into a woman, that I can’t do it” (Rosas, 2018). Yet the majority of responses appear to be relaxed about Miss María’s gender nonconformity. Manuel Hernandez for example says of Miss María and her place in the community, “Well, man or woman, or whatever she is, she is very important to us” (Hernandez, 2018). Members of the community overall appear to have developed a new perspective about Miss María,

seeing her not as a pariah to be avoided, but as part of the fabric of a rural way of life to reach out to and support. Accordingly, Miss María reflects on the impact of the documentary and her prior life with the kind of triumphal joy missing in the original documentary:

“They spat at me. They threatened me with their machetes. They threatened me with knives. But they couldn’t carry it through. This movie that Ruben made for me was very important ... I feel happier and braver. And I’m really grateful to him, because he helped me to move forward in life. And I feel happy about that. And I won, before God, I have won” (Fuentes, 2018).

The catharsis of a respectful relationship with the director Mendoza, and the friendships made after the film’s public release, underscore the documentary’s separate function to the one intended for global audiences. Acknowledging the responsibility that goes with such filmmaking appears vital too, particularly when depicting the lives of vulnerable minorities. Mendoza’s relationship with Miss María in this respect is significant when addressing the kind of questions once asked by Sandy Stone about the curating of trans female biographies in the twentieth century, specifically that of Lili Elbe’s *Man Into Woman*: “For whom was Lili Elbe constructed? Under whose gaze did her text fall? And consequently what stories appear and disappear in this kind of seduction?” (2006: 224). Similarly, with documentary, our understanding of the role of the director of the documentary, Mendoza, benefits from an extended hindsight and the one-year-on TV show. In an echo of Stone, Kate Nash asks generally:

“the documentary-maker’s gaze must be interrogated in order to draw attention to the process by which the social actor is transformed into the documentary subject.

The concern of such analysis is to interrogate the power of representation. Who is represented in the documentary, who represents them and with what effect?”

(2010: 22).

With the absence of Mendoza’s visibility during *MMSM*, his subsequent interview and the separate post-documentary interviews with Miss María provide a vital contribution to the documentary and how it impacts upon the lives of its participants – arguably *MMSM* is incomplete without them. *MMSM* is more than just a film, therefore, but an intervention into real people’s lives. Nash says, “One consequence of this focus on the documentary film is that the participant very rarely has a space from which to speak about their involvement in the documentary.” The post-documentary programmes provide an opportunity for an additional iteration for the subject and her community. In turn, it at least partially answers the questions posed by Nash: the cisgender director Mendoza appears not to be just an opportunistic filmmaker, though he may be this as well. He is also from the same locality as Miss María, and having heard of her as a local ‘legend,’ sought her out accordingly to make the film. He appears to have fostered an enduring, trusting, responsible relationship with Miss María that in turn has fostered a relationship of trust and sympathy between the subject and her community.

Returning to the broader, global audience, by viewing the representation of Miss María in Mendoza’s documentary and the subsequent, related TV shows, we see how the ramifications of the law for transgender people are in fact variable, especially outside of a middle-class or urban life. Sharon Cowan highlights how “Law’s techniques are themselves insufficient to take on the power of dominant, social sex/gender discourses and scripts” while also only allowing “for engagement at a responsive, rather than at a

pre-emptive, preventative level” (2015: 7). Citing the work of Dean Spade, Cowan distinguishes ‘top down’ forms of power that fail to address “the myriad of ways in which diverse and decentralized forms of power permeate and construct our lives” (20), against the potential benefits of ‘bottom up’ strategies (19). These in turn include “grassroots organizing across communities around local issues, creating and disseminating art projects, finding other ways of solving conflicts” (22). In relation to this analysis, it is worth noting that the factor that helps Miss María to forge a sympathetic relationship with her community in Boavita involves the artistic project of a documentary, not the intervention of the law. *MMSM* reveals the limits of LGBT+ narratives concerning mobility and law, and instead, in connection with the respective analyses of Spade and Cowan, of how community-based solutions may have the most resonant impact on the lives of trans women such as Miss María. It underscores the potential effectiveness of grassroots, community projects that can instigate positive change for the transgender woman and her community, in ways that appear unimaginable in terms of simply turning to law, or mobility and exile.

Conclusion

One of the greatest differences between the film *A Fantastic Woman* and the documentary *MMSM* concerns solutions for the trans female protagonist/subject, in the face of different forms of oppression. For the ultimately middle-class Marina, we see her life affected adversely by the incident of her partner’s death, but she has the social and economic capital, as well as temporary family networks, to leave her partner’s apartment

and start again. Within the cinematic representation, Marina's life and the forms of hostility she encounters parallel the experiences described in the works of Susan Stryker and Julia Serano. They reflect in turn the life of an urban-based middle-class transgender woman in the twenty-first century Anglophone Global North as well as Global South. Marina's aspirations and solutions accordingly fit with Gloria Anzaldúa's ethos of the Borderlands and embrace of mobility, "I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry 'home' on my back" (1999: 43).

By contrast, Miss María's predicament in *MMSM* is more resonant of the findings of B Camminga on transgender refugees in Africa. Addressing the kind of ethos of movement claimed by Anzaldúa, Camminga says, "there is a need to be wary of romanticising or glorifying borderland existence, stressing that this is a site of 'physical and political suffering'" (2019: 217). Citing the work of Arendt, Camminga highlights the "extreme loss of community, support, and security" of departing an original community (2019: 22-23), a situation exacerbated with the issue of being able to pass. "Being visibly read as transgender," says Camminga, "often compounds the difficulties with regard to accessing gainful employment" (211). In contrast to this situation, in *A Fantastic Woman* we see actress Daniela Vega's portrayal of Marina as a trans woman, described by O'Hara as "a rather glamorous, very beautiful young woman." Marina appears to have little problem 'passing' as cisgender, except in specific, tense, set-piece moments when this social capital is suspended, arguably for the sake of the dramatic narrative. The impact of passing/not-passing is portrayed inconsistently and selectively in *A Fantastic Woman*, but we see its consistently applied impact clearly enough in *MMSM*. Serano in fact addresses this significant dimension of transness, which evidently can have

a major impact on transgender lives regardless of class or location, urban or rural. She says, “Since an extraordinarily small percentage of trans people are physically able to ‘pass’ as their identified sex without the aid of hormones, this unnecessarily exposes the transsexual to all sorts of discrimination, harassment, and potential violence” (2016: 121).

Without the middle-class resources of economic capital, housing and employment that involves a liveable wage, as well as access to trans healthcare, the transgender life can be exposed to a significantly more challenging kind of experience. Mainstream representations in the arts and often in documentaries show a socially mobile, middle-class or aspiring working-class transgender woman whose clear arc and affirming message can resonate with mass audiences. However, this kind of representation is potentially distant from the lives of transgender women living outside of the urban, middle-class matrix with its advantages and particular obstacles. In these less represented lives in rural areas, social solidarity and community matter as much as individualism and self-actualization. Accordingly, Jack Halberstam’s call for a Transgender Gaze that encompasses “a vision of community, possibility and redemption through collaboration,” while absent in *A Fantastic Woman*, is over the course of a film production and its aftermath, realized here.

CeCe McDonald in *Free CeCe!*

Introduction: Policing and the prison industrial complex in relation to mainstream trans narratives in the U.S.A.

As briefly suggested in Lovemme Corazon's *Trauma Queen*, and extensively explored especially in Jamie Berrou's short-story writing, few issues signify the class-based and race-based divergence within and between trans communities in the Anglophone Global North like policing and the prison industrial complex, with the responding current political campaigns around prison abolition and defunding the police. Conceived by the social historian Mike Davis, the notion of a prison industrial complex encompasses the increasing commercialization of the prison sector in the 1990s and its emergence "as a major economic and political force" (A. Davis, 2003: 84). A racialized element of the prison industrial complex has also been identified by Black historians such as Angela Davis and Michelle Alexander, who see it as manifesting the most recent iteration of 'Jim Crow' persecution of black and brown Americans via policing and imprisonment. This includes in relation to its re-iterative exploitation of a supply of a cheap, disempowered form of labour, and the targeting of black and brown lives as a means of continued racialized marginalization, political scapegoating, and economic exploitation. As Davis says of the current iteration, arguably initiated by the 1994 Crime Bill of President Bill Clinton and Senator Joe Biden among other nominally left-of-centre Democrat politicians, the prison industrial complex involves not only cross-party ideals

of law enforcement and incarceration but “an array of relationships linking corporations, government, correctional communities, and media” (84).

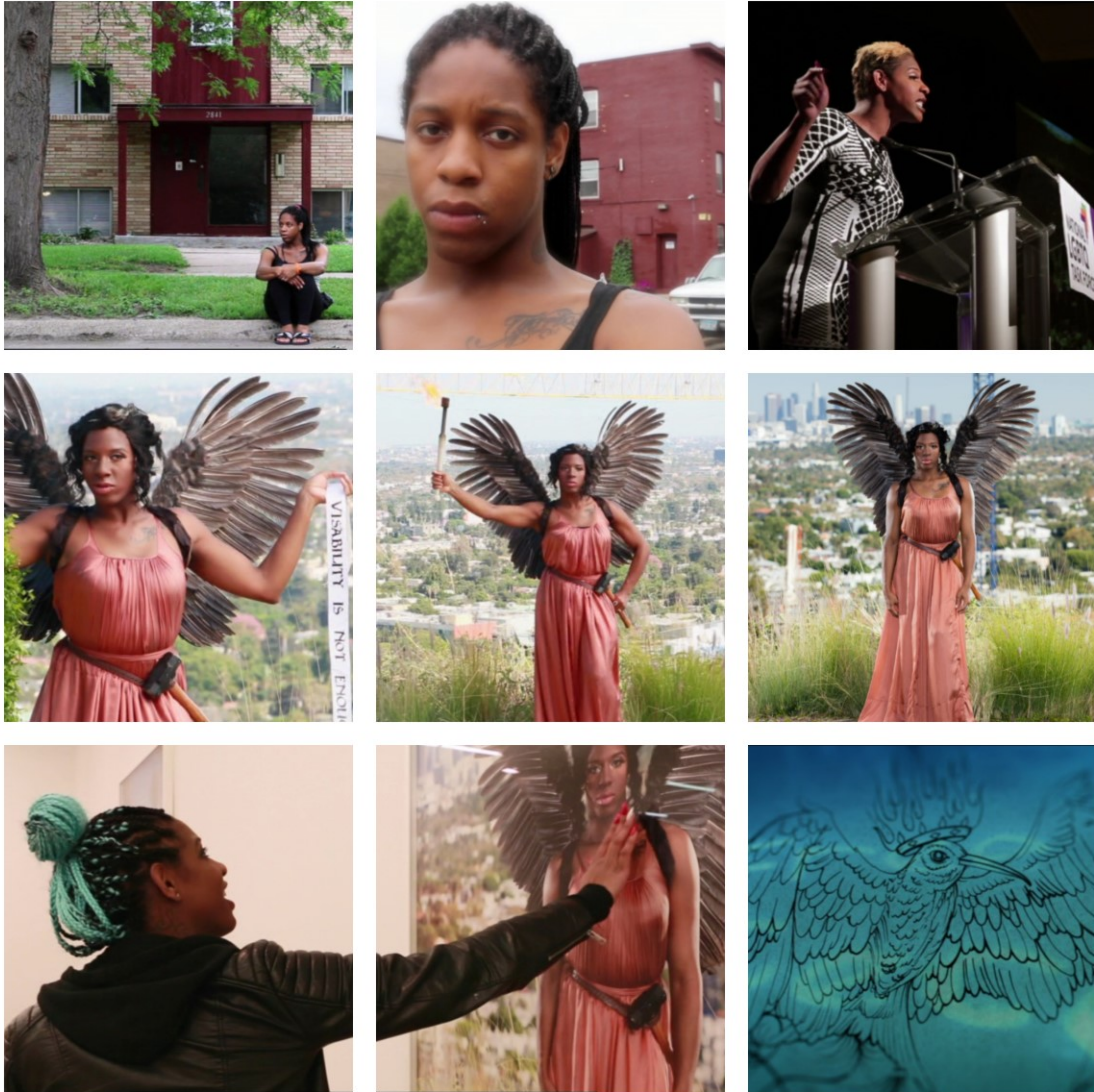
In relation to trans lives, Elias Walker Vitulli has observed how the “words, lives, and experiences” of imprisoned trans and gender-nonconforming people “are rarely part of trans studies conversations” (2014: 162-164). At a mainstream level, former Human Rights Campaign spokesperson and now Democrat Senator Sarah McBride makes no mention of the prison industrial complex in her homonormative memoir *Tomorrow Will Be Better* (2018). Janet Mock similarly occludes it from her talkshow circuit as well as her memoir *Redefining Realness* (2014c), while devoting two pages critical of mass incarceration in her 331-page, career-focused and romance-focused *Surpassing Certainty* (2018). Conversely, both Mock and McBride cite anti-carceral Stonewall veterans as inspirations, for example McBride referencing Marsha P. Johnson (2018: 18), and Mock claiming abolitionist campaigner Miss Major Griffin-Gracy as a mentor (2016: 9.14). This vocal identification that briefly name-checks iconography during interviews or literary passages arguably sanitizes and obscures the visceral anti-establishment discourse and the radical ideas used to challenge the status quo by such historic but also romanticized figures. Name-checking them does little, for example, to highlight a major component of the activism of Johnson, Griffin-Gracy, and Sylvia Rivera, and the grassroots organization that Johnson and Rivera helped form in 1970, the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR). Their nine-point manifesto includes demands directly addressing enduring issues of institutional police violence and discrimination, the issue of political sovereignty, and the reliance of U.S. society on the incarceration of its most vulnerable citizens:

“The immediate end of all policy harassment and arrest of transvestites and gay street people, and the release of transvestites and gay street people from all prisons and all other political prisoners ... We want a revolutionary peoples’ government, where transvestites, street people, women, homosexuals, blacks, puerto ricans, indians, and all oppressed people are free, and not fucked over by this government who treat us like the scum of the earth and kills us off like flies, one by one, and throws us into jail to rot” (Lewis, 2017: 76-77).

Researching this period of anti-carceral-focused QTPOC activism, Abram Lewis describes how another U.S.-based movement of the time, Transsexual Action Organization (TAO), “centred critiques of policing, incarceration, and other forms of state violence” with a simultaneous, anti-assimilationist rejection of strategies “that sought to build better relationships with law enforcement” (62). Class and race appear to have been contributing factors to the membership of these organizations, with Lewis noting how “TAO and STAR were arguably the most successful at developing an intersectional, coalition-based politics that centred especially vulnerable trans populations ... composed of low-income and homeless transfeminine people of color, immigrants, and sex-workers” (2017: 60-61). Their legacy, including in relation to abolitionism, can be seen not in the lifestyle narratives of Mock or the homonormative policy focus of McBride, but in the radical transfeminism of trans theorists and activists in North America such as Dean Spade, Eric Stanley, and Tourmaline, and organizations like the Trans and Intersex Justice Project and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project. It can be argued that the grassroots activists connected to these latter organizations, nameless by the standards of celebrity trans visibility, are the closest inheritors to the legacy of Johnson,

Rivera, et al. They either inhabit or work at the margins of a society policed by discriminatory law enforcement and delineated by the structural conditions of poverty and other related inequalities such as unaffordable housing and unstable, inadequately paid employment, conditions that cannot be repaired by visibility alone.

Rarely do trans figures emerge to receive mainstream attention, while signifying the coming together of issues of policing and incarceration in relation to class and race, like CeCe McDonald. Arrested in 2011 following an attack upon her by white-supremacists, during which in the act of self-defense McDonald killed one of her assailants, McDonald's case initially attracted local support from a community movement led by members of the local Minneapolis-based Trans Youth Support Network (TYSN) already familiar with McDonald, who in turn formed the 'CeCe Support Committee.' This grassroots base in turn led to national and international attention as McDonald awaited trial over several months in solitary confinement in a men's prison. Eventually sentenced to forty-one months in a men's prison and released on parole after nineteen months, McDonald has since emerged as a vocal advocate of the prison abolition movement in the U.S. With the exception of a few high-profile magazine interviews, such as one with *Rolling Stone* that covers McDonald's life story in linear detail (Erdely, 2014), the central resources that recount McDonald's experiences include her blog posts on her carceral experiences on a wordpress website and a documentary. Contrary to the *Rolling Stone* interview, these latter sources focus on the events surrounding her incarceration and the structural issues related to them, with substantial segments of her personal life absent.



Images from Free CeCe! (left to right, starting top):

- 1) *From the opening scene, McDonald in casual clothing in a suburban environment, reflecting on the issue of white supremacy in relation to her case.*

- 2) *Also from the opening scene, McDonald's defiant gaze as she stands near the bar where she was assaulted.*
- 3) *At the end of the documentary, we see McDonald transformed into a stylishly-dressed and accomplished public speaker, speaking out against racism, including racism in LGBT+ spaces.*
- 4) *From the exhibition in the final scenes of the documentary, 'Whose Feminism Is It Anyway?', in this pose, McDonald, as a potential fusion of phoenix and the typically white, American female icon of Columbia, holding a garland in one hand, and in the other a ribbon proclaiming, 'Visibility is not enough.'*
- 5) *Another pose for the exhibition, McDonald holding a torch, again taking ownership of an ostensibly white U.S. symbol, the Statue of Liberty.*
- 6) *The pose that becomes the central image in the exhibition, McDonald's hammer hung from her waist to indicate her readiness to fight for what she believes.*
- 7) *At the exhibition, McDonald excited at seeing the image.*
- 8) *The image of the phoenix used for her tattoo, displayed here in the closing credits.*

The Voice(s) of CeCe McDonald in *Free CeCe!* (1): As Part of Something Bigger Than Itself

With McDonald's experience of incarceration being central to the documentary, it can be argued that *Free CeCe!* exemplifies a tradition of documentary film-making about marginalized voices in the neoliberal age, of what Fernando Solanas describes as "Third Cinema" as "the expression of a new culture and of social changes. Generally speaking, Third Cinema gives an account of reality and history" (Willemen, 182). More specifically in relation to the emergence of neoliberalism, Michael Chanan highlights the emergence of a new paradigm of filmmaking involving,

"[a] big shift, in the political culture which documentary addresses, either directly or indirectly. On the one hand, the heartlands of capitalism saw the demise of traditional class politics and the gradual demoralization of the organized left in the face of neoliberalism; on the other, came the rise of second-wave feminism, identity politics and the new social movements, all of which have global resonance" (2007: v).

To these forces referred to by Chanan, amid the "very success of postwar capitalist reconstruction" is the enduring omission of the injustices to especially economically disadvantaged African Americans. Chanan notes that,

"the result [is] that the Civil Rights movement, which began to take shape in the 1950s, held out the promise of a separate politics which succoured the idea of black pride, with corresponding cultural implications. Eventually this would produce new modes of black film-making, both fiction and documentary" (242).

The development of these new modes of documentary-making, in keeping with the neoliberal ethos of individualism, has been met either with excitement or caution. Sujatha Fernandes analyses the neoliberal-inflected, curated personal stories of ostensibly

dispossessed voices which “shift the focus away from structurally defined axes of oppression and help to defuse the confrontational politics of social movements” (2017: 2) – arguably recognizable in the carefully curated, apolitical brand of Janet Mock. Michael Renov, however, also recognizes the powerful potential of new modes of autobiographical documentaries, contrary to the self-promotion and occlusion of social critiques that can occur, for an individualism that melds with community action:

“It is not at all surprising that much current autobiography has been produced at the margins of commercial culture by feminists, gays, people of color, and mavericks of every stripe. Contrary to critics who view this outpouring as reactionary – the individualist backlash against movement solidarity or the acting out of unbridled solipsism – the work is frequently engaged in community building and is deeply dialogic. This other may be the family as in the case of ‘domestic ethnography’ or members of a community linked by racial memory or elected affinity. Tonally, the work is tremendously diverse – celebratory, elegiac, solemn, delirious – but it is almost always affirmational of a self culturally specific and publicly defined” (2004: xvi-xvii).

Renov concludes that, “the autobiographical impetus I am describing has infused the documentary tradition with a much-needed vitality and expanded its vernacular.”

Arguably, *Free CeCe!* can be viewed as a reflection of Renov’s optimistic position, a semi-autobiographical trans story inclusive of family reconciliation and community-based camaraderie, but also one addressing institutional racism via a host of informed voices. Accordingly, perhaps in keeping with the imperfection of a queer and communitarian text, it produces a sometimes conceptually dis-unified amalgam of

separate ‘community’ voices and competing priorities and ideas, while generating a tension against the narrative of the individual. On this latter point, McDonald both occupies the documentary’s centre stage but does not restrict it from other voices and the larger context that the film attempts to connect with, from McDonald’s experience of mass incarceration to broader movements that challenge the rhetoric of meritocracy and freedom synonymous with homonational, neoliberal ideology. Or as Chanan says of the neoliberal-age, social-justice-focused documentary generally, “Here we find a dialectic that moves back and forth between personal and social identity, the self-inscription of the film-maker in an act of self-assertive presence, and the re-interpretation of historical imagery by recontextualising it” (243).

Free CeCe!, then, consistent with the dichotomy identified by Chanan, and inclusive of a semi-biographical mode that shares screen time with Queer and Black activist communities and accompanying critical traditions, combines both a personal story and a broader critique of mass incarceration. This is in relation to Black and QTPOC experience, and in turn McDonald’s voice vies with a flurry of accompanying others.

In the first half, these voices include TYSN’s chief executive Katie Burgess, who leads the community organizing to raise public awareness of McDonald’s plight. She is interviewed along with a series of legal experts on either side of the trial’s divide. Additional voices come in the form of recordings of McDonald being misgendered on the news. Mediating the interviews and threading together the disparate voices is high-profile trans actress Laverne Cox, making clear her identification with McDonald. Yet the voices pluralize further in the second half: family members within domestic settings vie for time

with experts on Black history, Queer history, and/or the prison industrial complex, such as Angela Davis, Tourmaline, and Eric Stanley. Community organizers Isa Noyala of El/La para TransLatinas and Lourdes Ashley Hunter of the Trans Women of Color Collective then become the focus of the camera's gaze at, respectively, a shrine in San Francisco for murdered trans women of colour, and a public square demonstration in New York City. The number of voices is unremitting, and in turn, indicates that the "discursive coherence" of the transgender voice, previously "a necessary strategy to combat logics of pathologization" (Anastasia, 2014), gives way to a reformulation, different to the tightly curated, much documented, individual-focused, transitioning trans narrative. Perhaps signaling the confidence, or the necessary plurality of McDonald's intersectional experience of oppression, the pluralized voice of *Free CeCe!* accords with Andrew Anastasia's recognition of how, "As transgender studies approaches its second iteration, claiming our discursive voice is less urgent." Anastasia notes the impact of this second iteration where the trans woman's voice and the transgender cause are less unified or connected: "Trans* voices can fail to make sense in spectacular ways when our voices no longer provide adequate evidence for the bodies that emit them." Anastasia's notion of a conflict between voice and body is an intriguing one, and one way of understanding the pluralization of a discursive voice in *Free CeCe!* McDonald's voice(s) – those that share time with her in the documentary – are pivotal to her experience if we are to make sense of it. The individualized, curated personal storytelling template identified by Fernandes is replaced by a more communitarian, politicized, and intersectional mode.

The difficulty in balancing an individual story with social critique involving several intersectional strands is, however, also arguably a reason for its lukewarm

reception by certain film critics during the film's showing at various film festivals. On the one hand, *Free CeCe!* is praised by the LA Film Festival's reviewer Christopher James for its "moving and interesting" representation of the personalized narrative surrounding McDonald (James, 2016), as well as for the significance of the issues it raises. As Imogen Hay says at the film's showing at the Scottish Queer International Film Festival, the audience had appeared to gather "not so much to view a film, but to address transphobia, racism and expose the horrors of the American prison system" (Hay, 2017). Hay's observation indicates another of the documentary's functions beyond entertainment: *Free CeCe!* can be said to work as a rallying point for communities of activists and sympathizers to gather around. As Hay says, irrespective of the film's success as a form of entertainment, "That is why it is difficult to criticize the experience of this film, the conversations it brought up far surpassed seeing the experience as only a screening."

Conversely, *Free CeCe!*'s value as a communitarian text does appear to undermine its impact if Hay's position is indicative of some critical reaction. Hay claims, for example, "I struggled to follow the path of the documentary, and this lack of focus within the film prompted me to lose mine as a viewer." On the issue of coherence and the melding of personalization and larger contexts, James similarly describes an awkward balancing act for the documentary, with *Free CeCe!* being "at odds with itself. It wants to tell the story of CeCe but it also wants to be a grander examination of the plight of the transgender community as a whole."

Arguably, this pattern of criticism highlights the challenge of crafting a single, coherent transgender narrative around a subject faced with, and keen to discuss, multiple

forms of structural inequalities. Yet it also appears to reflect McDonald's own necessary intentions for the documentary in departing from either an activist-based, single-issue focus or an individualized, apolitical, gender-transition narrative, and putting instead her abolitionist-based activism at the forefront of her story, while interspersing it with fragments of a transitioning arc and slice-of-life narrative. The effect of eschewing a purely personal story around her narrative is an awkward product for some reviewers, evidently, but it is arguably symptomatic of a mix of intersectional and political storytelling. Rejecting the idea, in one post-documentary interview, of developing her status as celebrity or brand, McDonald says,

“If I’m a public personality or whatever the case may be, that wasn’t my intention. What I am is a black trans woman who is an activist, who is fighting to help the most marginalized, the most targeted ... I’m not trying to produce some public image, or be a ‘celebrity,’ or any of that” (2017: 34).

By this apparent determination to pluralize the voice and extend the camera's focus beyond the film's subject, as stated in subsequent interviews, McDonald arguably answers some of the questions asked by Kate Nash in her analysis of issues of trust in documentary filmmaking. Nash for example says,

“Since the truth of the documentary is no longer guaranteed, the documentary-maker's gaze must be interrogated in order to draw attention to the process by which the social actor is transformed into the documentary subject. The concern of such analysis is to interrogate the power of representation. Who is represented in the documentary, who represents them and with what effect?” (2014: 22).

Thematically, and in response to these questions, McDonald's input appears to be substantial in what the film both includes and omits. By contrast to the documentary's focus on mass incarceration, for example, the interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine – uncharacteristically for McDonald in relation to many of her other interviews – appears far more typical of the focus on personal, linear narrative, with harrowing details of McDonald's 'lost' years during adolescence. These accounts are largely absent from both the documentary and interviews such as in *Mask* magazine when McDonald is accompanied with activist and campaigner Burgess (Burgess, 2015), or with Griffin-Gracy in the TPOC archival anthology *Trap Door* (2017), where the focus is much more on structural racism, poverty, and mass incarceration. In this respect, McDonald's additional media output is useful for responding to another of Nash's concerns, namely how "the participant very rarely has a space from which to speak about their involvement in the documentary." McDonald's supplementary output suggests that the documentary is aligned with her own priorities in terms of narrative. Whether or not the documentary succeeds in terms of slick, satisfyingly structured entertainment, it appears to accomplish the act of a semi-autobiographical, community-focused documentary, as celebrated by Renov, by capturing the voice of CeCe McDonald, and in turn, the many other voices and their ideas who identify with her story.

The Voice(s) in *Free CeCe!* (2): Balancing multiple justice-related and abolitionist debates, including violence against trans women by the prison industrial complex, and violence against trans women of colour by members of the public

It can be argued that the documentary's narrative complexity stems from the multiple issues produced by the McDonald case. This includes the issue of violence against trans women of colour by civilians, but also violence against trans women of colour by the prison industrial complex. Hay's review reflects a potential conflict with these issues:

“The film seemed not to know what it wanted to be. Was it an expose of the American prison system? A retelling of CeCe's story and its importance? A history of political campaigns to support transgender people? It left me with many moral questions: the justification of carrying a weapon and ‘protecting yourself’ was presented in a very troubling way, such as in a rally where a woman [in New York, from members of the Trans women of color collective] shouted to a crowd to carry scissors and to ‘use your nails’ to fight back, almost seeming to call on more violence in response to transphobia which, as the film already addressed, kills people. In this way, it complicated the issue for me as a viewer. I could see what they were going for, but I still found the way in which things were described as morally questionable.”

Hay's discomfort arguably reflects the uncertain waters that are being charted with this documentary in relation to the conceptualizing of prison abolition. Outside of the documentary and on this potentially underdeveloped topic, scholar and co-founder of the Black Lives Matter movement, Patrisse Cullors, for example notes, “The historical context of abolition is minimally understood, either in today's social movements or in U.S. society more broadly” (2019: 1684). Cullors, in turn, does advocate for the kind of ideas implicit to what is being expressed by McDonald and others throughout the

documentary, as a starting point to a more complex discussion on alternative modes of justice. The initially aligned ideas include, for example, the need “to abolish prisons, policing, and militarization, which are wielded in the name of ‘public safety’ and ‘national security’” (Cullors, 1686). Yet Cullors also addresses, at the next level, the idea of “reparative justice into our vision for society and community building in the twenty-first century.” Cullors articulates some personalized examples of restorative justice that includes the notion that “Abolition seeks out restorative practices for all, even when that implies working with the perpetrator of said violence” (1688). Cullors, as a former victim of abuse, then details an example where, through careful mediation over a period of time, she confronts and establishes a dialogue with the perpetrator of the abuse. She describes this engagement as “challenging, heart-wrenching, and awkward. But most of all, our meeting was healing. Incredibly healing” (1694). This sensitive issue of engaging in processes of reparative justice arguably represents the next step in discussions on prison abolition and alternative forms of healing and justice, but it is entirely absent in *Free CeCe!*. This is most apparent with the barest reference to the perpetrators of the original hate crime against McDonald, particularly Molly Shannon Flaherty, who appears to have instigated the original violence by physically assaulting McDonald while also using verbally racist and transphobic abuse. She is later jailed for six months for assault (13.06). Arguably, her absence in the documentary reveals a missing ‘other half’ to a sufficiently developed debate on abolition and reparative justice, as Cullors discusses it, with its implications for both the victim and the perpetrator of hate crimes.

The documentary instead skirts the issue of alternative modes of justice before settling on the convincing argument that McDonald was wrongly imprisoned due to the

nature of the trial and the implicitly racist and transphobic attitudes that shaped the prosecution and trial overall. Yet this notion of wrongful arrest is subtly different to the issue of abolitionism, even as the two subjects potentially intersect in McDonald's case. The fleeting nature of this intersection is underlined by the documentary's subsequent movement away from abolitionist ideas about alternative, restorative justice, to a more substantial focus on racism and gender-policing involved in both the prison industrial complex and the family.

On abolition and restorative justice, the documentary does briefly interview trans abolitionist and scholar Eric Stanley, who, like Cullors, suggests a need to discuss alternatives to carceral justice. Stanley asks, "I think that something that abolition really allows us to do is imagine an entirely different way of relating to each other. What would it mean, what would real justice look like? What would real accountability look like? What would real healing actually feel like to us?" (68.06). These questions, in alignment with Cullors's similar reflections, might have been the platform for a deeper exploration of restorative justice as a replacement for carceral justice. They might also have led to pragmatic reflections, similar to those made by Cullors and the Black Lives Matter movement, on defunding the police and finding alternative restorative/transformatory treatments for social, psychological, and economic causations and situations in relation to racism and transphobia. At this juncture, *Free CeCe!* might have stabilized around this narrative and become a documentary focused on abolitionism. However, Stanley's questions are left unanswered.

Instead, the documentary shifts its focus to violence against trans women of colour, via an interview in the documentary's second half with the mother of Islan

Nettles, who discusses how her daughter was killed in a transphobic attack. The interview focuses on the need to protect trans women of colour from violence (73.08), and is discernibly different from Stanley's rhetorical questions, with nothing mentioned about the sensitive issue of alternative forms of treatment for and engagement with violent offenders – including perpetrators of hate crime – against innocent and marginalized people. Separate media coverage of the killing, not referred to in the documentary, in fact highlights how Nettles's parents believe the killer's twelve-year sentence for second-degree manslaughter is “too lenient” (*New York Times*, 2016). As mentioned by Hay's critique of the film, the documentary deviates towards the understandable rage of TWOC communities on violence against trans women of colour, as expressed during a public protest. Exemplifying the point made by Hay, however, it is unclear whether the documentary is calling for the prison industrial complex to be shut down, or to protect trans women of colour, for example with additional hate-crime legislation. Complicating this issue further is a contribution by filmmaker and trans woman of colour Tourmaline, in alignment with Stanley, calling for people to “challenge the economy of outrage” and to reject the creation of “disposable lives” through carceral justice. The documentary shifts from expressions of outrage to calls for challenging an economy of outrage, without distinguishing the two.

Prison abolition at a conceptual level in *Free CeCe!*, therefore, as noted by film critic Marlon Wallace, is arguably rendered by these sometimes competing segments to “just a talking point” (2016). Another major ‘talking point’ raised in the documentary, as referred to briefly by McDonald, concerns racism within highly resourced, white-centred, mainstream LGBT+ organizations. McDonald briefly makes the statement towards the

end of *Free CeCe!*, to audience applause, when she is shown speaking publicly at a event. The point is left unexplored, however, and with only the evidence of the documentary for support, this isolated statement is confusing and narratively dissatisfying, given that the only white LGBT+ activists we see referenced consistently in the film are Leslie Feinberg, Katie Burgess, Eric Stanley, and legal specialist Chase Strangio. Each of them are shown advocating passionately on behalf of McDonald, with Feinberg briefly incarcerated for hir graffiti in support of McDonald on the walls of police HQ, while Burgess devotes considerable effort as the organizer of the CeCe Support Committee for McDonald. This is not to question McDonald's claim, however. Outside of the documentary, in a preceding event titled 'Socialism 2014,' McDonald engages in an insightful discussion on how one of the most highly-resourced LGBT+ organizations in the U.S., the very same Human Rights Campaign satirized by Jamie Berrout in her short story 'Mansion,' failed to provide public support for her during her incarceration. McDonald's exchange with the conference chair is a revealing indication of the way mainstream LGBT+ organizations appear to distance themselves from issues of racism, poverty, and the prison industrial complex, as they did in the case of CeCe McDonald:

Conference chair: Now, most mainstream larger LGBT groups didn't get involved in your case, groups like the Human Rights Campaign. Why do you think that is, CeCe, and what would you say to them?

McDonald: 'Fuck off' (Audience laughter) And I say that because I had a really strong support system, the CeCe Support Committee, all of you who literally donated and spent time writing letters, and I couldn't give a fuck less about the Human Rights Campaign, cos guess what, I still overcame my obstacle with or

without them ... If you don't want to support that, then your existence is really irrelevant (McDonald, 2014: 24.46-27.00).

It can be argued that, while risking overwhelming the documentary further, the insight provided by this exchange at 'Socialism 2014' would have benefited *Free CeCe!*, by connecting intersecting issues of racism and LGBT+ activism in relation to McDonald's experience, as briefly raised by her. Instead, talk of abolition splinters into an array of issues, each one deserving substantial focus in its own right, but none receiving the development they require.

Where the documentary succeeds most convincingly in relation to debates on carceral justice is the simple exposure of prison's inhumanity as well as its particular damage to incarcerated trans women. From the beginning of *Free CeCe!*, it is evident that McDonald's transness is managed and framed in relation to the justice system in ways that are detrimental to her mental health, her safety, and her ability to get justice. In the latter case, this begins with the media coverage, where the news reports replayed in the documentary reveal the bias of suppressing her trans identity, for example, "St Paul man arrested in fatal stabbing at bar ... A twenty-three year-old man was arrested on suspicion of murder" (1.55). McDonald's prison-related narrative similarly highlights the ideological dominance of cisheteropatriarchy, with the systematic attempt to occlude her transness, partly by establishing prohibitions exempt to other prisoners. As McDonald says,

"They still view us as men, and they feel like we aren't entitled to those things that women have ... That I couldn't wear my clothes a certain way ... shorts, or ...

that accentuates my body ... or curves ... A lot of things that they did to take away my transness, and turn me into a man ... so I can fit in or be safe” (39.43).

The regime McDonald endures in prison conforms to studies elsewhere, reflecting trans female experiences in men’s prisons. More broadly, it undermines the notion of either a trans-friendly paradigm or a justice system that does anything other than debilitate those in its control. Consistent with McDonald’s reflections in *Free CeCe!*, trans abolitionist campaigners Janetta Johnson and Toshio Meronek, for example, note how,

“Inside, trans women are routinely referred to using male pronouns. This verbal anti-trans violence, which many trans girls experienced outside, only gets worse inside prison. If someone lived as a woman prior to prison, misgendering them feels like an attack, and their basic instinct is to get ready to fight. This feeling of always having to be on the defensive is mentally and physically draining” (2015: 262-263).

The effect of various prison prohibitions on McDonald’s mental health, in alignment with the broader analysis by Johnson and Meronek, are reflected in McDonald’s recollection, “It was really depressing ... I feel like they tried to make you hate yourself as someone who’s not conforming” (42.29). One particular situation that appears to have affected an already traumatized McDonald during her trial involves her being placed in solitary confinement for three months prior to her actual sentence, officially for her own safety as a trans woman in danger from the male prisoners. The documentary suggests the solitary confinement affects her mental health during this time, arguably exacerbating her own trauma and desperation, and in turn affecting the outcome of the trial (23.11). Johnson and Meronek note how solitary confinement of trans women is a common occurrence,

ostensibly presented as a means of protecting the trans prisoner but effectively punishing them for their gender non-conformity:

“A study of California inmates found that 59 percent of trans women held in men’s prisons were sexually abused, vs. 4 percent of non-trans prisoners.

Reporting these assaults can elicit retaliation, including time in solitary confinement, which is justified by prison administrators as a ‘safety measure’ for the good of the trans person” (262).

Overall, *Free CeCe!* can be said to succeed as a case study in consolidating other research by revealing the inadequacy of existing institutions to cater for trans identity. To a degree, this is problematic, in that it suggests the solution might be for prisons to better accommodate trans female identity, a reformist response hardly in keeping with the general abolitionist position of McDonald and the theme of *Free CeCe!*. Again, more time and case studies focused on the inherent violence of prison might have benefitted the abolitionist position referenced in the documentary. Yet to return to Renov’s appraisal of new forms of autobiographical documentaries, *Free CeCe!* also encapsulates how “Tonally, the work is tremendously diverse – celebratory, elegiac, solemn, delirious – but it is almost always affirmational of a self culturally specific and publicly defined” (xvii). In this vein, *Free CeCe!*’s value as a documentary related to abolitionism can also be seen as providing a platform for subsequent discussions, rather than producing solutions. True to Renov’s broader observation, “the work is frequently engaged in community building and is deeply dialogic.” The issue of coherence and multiple strands is arguably a price for this dynamic, and at the very least, a dialogue with the audience is established to address the point made by Cullors outside of the documentary, that “The historical

context of abolition is minimally understood, either in today's social movements or in U.S. society more broadly." *Free CeCe!* in turn arguably embodies this confusion of subtly different ways of understanding the abolitionist concept. The documentary reveals a subject that evidently requires further development and clarity with the broader public.

The Gaze of CeCe McDonald in the Closing Scene of *Free CeCe!* (1): Self-actualization, Solidarity and the Question of 'Whose Feminism Is It Anyway?'

On Kate Nash's urging of how "the documentary-maker's gaze must be interrogated," we also see parallels with Stefanie van de Peer's adaptation of Gaze theory in relation to feminist documentary making in the developing world. This includes, according to van de Peer, "conceptions of the reciprocity of an intersubjective look between spectator, subject and director that results – through the unfolding of histories and stories enfolded by subject-positions – into a feminist solidarity" (2017: 3). The Gaze of CeCe McDonald, streamed through the visual medium of a documentary constructed by multiple participants, is resultingly complex. Ultimately, however, the documentary has McDonald at its centre, and a subject's arc is portrayed, with a Gaze that acquires increasing confidence and prestige in the public realm as the documentary continues. Unlike *Miss Maria, Skirting the Mountain*, therefore, there is a discernible arc involving the subject. Simultaneously, the anti-neoliberal themes underscore how a personal arc, one involving a process of self-actualization, can be depicted without it becoming an example of neoliberal-themed, curated storytelling. In this respect, McDonald's arc embodies the position stated by bell hooks, who on the importance of self-actualization within solidarity-based movements, emphasizes:

“it’s worth restating Donna Haraway’s challenge to feminist thinkers to resist making ‘one’s own political tendencies to be the telos of the whole’ so we can accept different accounts of female experience and also face ourselves as complex subjects who embody multiple locations ... Certainly, collective black female experience has been about the struggle to survive in diaspora. It is the intensity of that struggle, the fear of failure (as we face daily the reality that many black people do not and are not surviving) that has led many black women thinkers, especially within feminist movement, to wrongly assume that strength in unity can only exist if difference is suppressed and shared experience is highlighted ... [but] opposition and resistance cannot be made synonymous with self-actualization on an individual or collective level ... Opposition is not enough. In that vacant space after one has resisted there is still the necessity to become – to make oneself anew” (1992: 51).

Free CeCe! appears to recognize the significance of self-actualization within a broader activist setting, as articulated by hooks. In the construction of the personal arc, McDonald’s initial reflections are in a casual setting, with McDonald dressed in sweat pants, tank top and plastic sandals, in a suburban location. The overall look is unremarkable; she could be anyone. A shift then occurs as the events of her incarceration are described and analysed, before the documentary climaxes, first with McDonald having become a stylishly attired public speaker, and then as the subject of an art exhibition called ‘Whose Feminism Is It Anyway?.’ Not unlike the arc of *A Fantastic Woman*, the protagonist’s final scene captures a symbolic transformation, concluding in the prestigious setting of the fine arts.

The symbolism of transformation into an articulate and politicized speaker on social justice is consolidated by the recurring symbol of the phoenix. We see it the first time when McDonald visits a tattoo parlour to celebrate her release. A drawing of a phoenix that will re-appear during the final credits is shown to her, with McDonald describing her motivation: “My idea of the phoenix was the fire being in the inside ... It symbolizes the fire that is within me” (56.49). This personal sentiment is re-affirmed towards the documentary’s end at the gallery in which the exhibition ‘Whose Feminism Is It Anyway?’ takes place. McDonald again describes her identification with the mythical bird,

“This creature embodies resilience, it embodies me throughout my transitioning ... I am a person who overcame these tribulations that people thought were going to keep me down. I refuse to become a statistic. I refuse to become another victim. I refuse to let someone determine my life” (85.00).

This second expression of becoming is also given the political dimension in the accompanying photo shoot, in which the inclusion of trans and Black feminism is signified. We see that the arc is more than material; it is idealistic, political, and intellectual.

Community, solidarity, and a demand for social change are encompassed in the significations of the exhibition, highlighting the endpoint of McDonald’s ‘journey of transition,’ not with the change of gender, or improved conditions concerning housing and employment or celebrity status, but of embracing the politics of resistance against the U.S.A.’s prison industrial complex. The image of McDonald at this climax is in fact one of three “transgendered women activists ‘committed to direct action and civil

disobedience” (Edelman, 2016). These appear to occupy centre stage in a photo installation titled ‘Trans Liberation,’ the three trans women “standing in powerful poses,” a hammer hanging ominously from McDonald’s belt, while the other trans models hold a rifle and a brick, respectively. Elsewhere in the exhibition, though unexplored in the documentary, is a piece titled, ‘Goddess,’ “composed of a pair of wings adorned with multicolored ribbons cascading onto the floor. The ribbons are embroidered with feminist-themed slogans like ‘my body, my choice’ and ‘free our sisters, free ourselves” (Edelman). Overall, the exhibition, with its slogans of solidarity and TWOC focus, appears to challenge the white-centred and middle-class, cisgendered structuring of feminism in the Anglophone Global North, in reflection of Alison Phipps’s observation that “White and privileged women dominate mainstream feminism” (2020: 6).

Visually and in terms of the defiant Gaze, the image of McDonald in the photo installation incorporates more than just her personalized identification with a phoenix. Dressed in a shining toga with a pair of wings emerging from her back, McDonald’s depiction is also subversively resonant of the national, female personification of the United States, Columbia. Traditionally, Columbia is depicted in mainstream institutions such as Columbia Film Studios as a blonde white woman, as well as relating further back to the myths of the ancient world idealized by white-centred, European-centred societies, namely of Greece and the Middle East and such winged goddesses as Hecate. In the documentary footage, additional poses show McDonald holding a flamed torch, and in another image, a ribbon stating “visibility is not enough.”

The combination of a symbol of liberty with a rejection of the neoliberal-aligned conception of trans liberty, namely visibility, contrasts with the position advocated

separately by McBride and Mock. In *Redefining Realness*, Mock for example says, “I believe that telling our stories, first to ourselves and then to one another and the world, is a revolutionary act ... I hope that my being *real* with you will help empower you to step into who you are and encourage you to share yourself with those around you” (xviii). For Mock perhaps most of all, visibility and the sharing of narratives will arguably liberate trans women of colour in an act of individual empowerment. For McDonald, in this final image of the documentary especially, the individualized connection with the phoenix and the idea of rebirth is balanced with a call to arms for solidarity, in this specific scene in connection to feminism. As well as the claim of personal resilience, she says, “We need to learn to stick with each other. Stick up for each other. Empower each other as women. To move with our heads held high” (85.00).

The title of the exhibition, in consolidation of this theme, connects to the tradition of radical feminism within Trans Studies too. It shares, for example, the position expressed by trans feminist Emi Koyama, herself following in a tradition that questions the inclusiveness and unity of feminism in the Anglophone Global North. Koyama analyses the relationship between feminism and trans identity and how the terms ‘feminism’ and ‘sisterhood’ exclude “racial equality, economic justice and freedom of gender expression” (2020: 737). In *Free CeCe!*, the invocation of an intersectional, Black feminism highlights the connection of the documentary’s central theme with the one addressed by Koyama. Koyama for example cites the Black lesbian ‘Combahee River Collective.’ Its declaration, made in 1977, includes the statement,

“Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are

separatists demand ... We reject the stance of lesbian separatism because it is not a viable political analysis or strategy for us” (Koyama, 738).

In this pronouncement, we see the principles of contemporary intersectional feminism upon which McDonald’s radical QTPOC activism is now based.

Against the context of the documentary’s focus on racism and mass incarceration, and in alignment with Koyama’s essay, McDonald ends the documentary challenging a middle-class and white-centred mainstream feminism and LGBT+ politics.

Simultaneously, she subverts the implicitly white iconography of the U.S. Dressed in the elegant shining toga, she has replaced an originally white-centred symbol for the U.S.A. with one re-imagined as a trans woman of colour, offering a new iconography of the racially oppressed for the U.S.A.

The Gaze(s) in *Free CeCe!* (2): Gazing Is Not Enough



The promotional image for *Free CeCe!* by trans artist Micah Bazant captures the act of seeing and the related ideas of human connection and empathy discussed by van de Peer on “feminist solidarity” in documentary-making. As van de Peer says, the Gaze in

these settings involves “conceptions of the reciprocity of an intersubjective look between spectator, subject and director ... [which establish] emancipating relationships across classifications and borders” (2, 13). The image drawn by Bazant, who describes themselves as “a visual artist who works with social justice movements to reimagine the world” (Bazant, 2021), signifies the sharing of this ambition of an emancipating relationship, and with it the understanding of the cruelty of the carceral system. The preference for a drawn image over a photograph, the depiction of a broad smile, and the use of warm colours has the effect of both distancing McDonald from the film’s harrowing subject matter while softening and re-humanizing the potentially debilitating signification of her appearance in a prison’s orange jump suit. This promotional image simultaneously centres and de-territorializes McDonald’s relationship with incarceration, removing mass incarceration from the symbolic field of justice and isolating it, then opening it up to critique. Finally, the image’s origin also highlights the significance of solidarity with the interned, as an adaptation of the photographed picture of trans elder Leslie Feinberg, hir hand on the barrier dividing them from McDonald as Feinberg visits her in prison.

The solidarity captured in the photograph is, however, also ambiguous, given how McDonald is a victim of a racialized prison industrial complex. In this context, the prosecution and judicial system have removed the racial as well as transphobic dimensions from the attack on McDonald, turning a hate crime, in the words of the prosecuting attorney Michael Freeman in the documentary, into a “street fight” (21.38). Feinberg’s white hand is both a moment of solidarity and support from a white trans elder to an incarcerated trans woman of colour, but also a reminder that it is the white hand that

rests on the visitor's side of the barrier. Feinberg's Gaze, therefore, is a sympathetic, intersubjective one as it rests on a victim of transphobic white-supremacy. Yet given the racial dynamics that underpin the picture's context, and the contrasting circumstances of those either side of the barrier, this expression of solidarity, it can be argued, is not enough. As van de Peer suggests, with the documentary viewed as much a prompt as a form of entertainment, "The spectator is challenged with the fourth look to engage in a more active way in the cinematic discourse and the interpretation of the narrative" (10-11). The documentary's function here can be said to serve as much a prompt for the engagement in "a more active way" with issues of mass incarceration, rather than as a form of merely entertainment, or education, or their fusion as 'infotainment.' The act, even of sympathetic viewing, is not enough.

As suggested by Bazant's promotional image and confirmed in the original photo, the Gaze of solidarity also comes in various forms in the documentary, and is accompanied by action. From white trans activists, arguably the pivotal presence in the first half of the documentary is that of Burgess, organizer of the collectivized campaign to draw media attention to McDonald's plight. In a joint interview with McDonald in *Mask* magazine, Burgess highlights the necessary community-based strategies required to combat the combination of a mainstream media and mainstream LGBT+ movement that, at a general level, implicitly colludes with the prison industrial complex:

"Having access to seasoned anarchist organizers and prison abolitionists was vital for me to frame my critiques – particularly when up against mainstream LGBTQ organizations that were pushing agendas of prison reform (at best) ... Also, the tireless work of Billy Navarro Jr. to promote the campaign on social media. The

development of critical talking points by the uncanny brains of the CeCe Support Committee, which included well-seasoned anarchist organizers who also understood how to develop and implement tools like press releases and how to manage media representatives. Without the organizations that were operating out of The Exchange (a community center in South Minneapolis focused on serving primarily trans and queer people of color) at the time, none of this would have been possible” (Burgess, 2015).

Burgess’s criticism of white-centred LGBT+ organizations in this magazine interview is a vital one, in signification of the act of allyship and solidarity. In the documentary and outside of it in interviews, she is the white trans woman criticizing white LGBT+ communities, acting on, instead of ignoring, an issue outside the borders of white-centred LGBT+ activism. Meanwhile, Burgess’s reflections underscore the vast number of unattributed activists needed to raise awareness of McDonald’s incarceration, and the value of collectivized support, rather than just the top-down, celebrity intervention via, for example, social media, as important as this aspect becomes as McDonald’s incarceration is recognized internationally. The aforementioned Billy Navarro Jr., evidently crucial for the social media campaign, is a fleeting, background figure in *Free CeCe!* Other figures who campaign for McDonald’s liberation, for example a friend of McDonald’s, Rai’vyn Cross, can be seen speaking on archival youtube footage in accompaniment to Burgess on television interviews discussing the case in its initial phase (Cross, 2012), but Cross plays no active part in the documentary. The scale of the operation to raise public awareness is only touched upon in the documentary, but its presence underscores the myriad Gazes of solidarity which at a grassroots level mobilize

and devote time to the cause of a racialized and dehumanized, incarcerated victim of a hate crime.

The Gaze and the Voice are two aspects that co-join in solidarity in the case of CeCe McDonald. *Free CeCe!*, with the active involvement of myriad gazes, voices, and actions, can be seen in this sense as the product of community referred to by Renov, in this case involving a potentially overwhelming number of members. To some film critics such as Hay and James, the result is incoherent. Yet a closer inspection of the documentary's many themes, gazes, and voices, also reveals the care taken to shape the inclusiveness of the documentary's scope, and the queer-based nature of the imperfection. Bazant's artwork is arguably part of this attempt to draw upon trans perspectives and construct a specifically collective structure resonant of trans experience and community organizing. Bazant describes themselves as a "white, trans, anti-zionist jewish *timtum* (one of six ancient jewish gender categories)", their work channeled into social justice and the humanity of the most vulnerable members of the trans community, as exemplified by their 'Trans Life & Liberation' Art Series depicting trans women of colour (Bazant, 2021). Another contributor to *Free CeCe!* is the musician Jordana LeSesne who produces the documentary's music. As a trans woman of colour LeSesne has, like McDonald, been the victim of a horrific hate crime, with LeSesne beaten by a group of men outside a concert in Ohio in 2000 (Riedel, 2019). The attack was ultimately unpunished, and its impact on LeSesne included derailing her promising international career for several years. The documentary's final music sequence by LeSesne, introduced as the image of McDonald at the exhibition morphs into the closing credits, conjures via its minor key a mystical-hued, vaguely Middle-Eastern synth-rock fusion called 'At What

Cost.’ Complemented by the visual image of the drawing of the phoenix used for McDonald’s tattoo, it introduces grinding electric-guitar power cords at the outset. Subsequently, it integrates a gentler, fluidic synth and synthesized choired voices. This score can be said to encapsulate McDonald’s experience as a trans woman of colour, with shifts from defiance and anger to a transcendental uplift, or at least their dual incorporation. Yet LeSesne’s involvement in the project is also symbolic of the documentary’s additional, organic identity for a transgender community of the dispossessed. As LeSesne says in an interview,

“I absolutely had to do *Free CeCe!* ... There are so many parallels – when I started learning about her story, especially how she was brought up ... it really struck a chord with me. I would have done it for free. I said to myself, ‘If this is the last project I ever work on, that I’m ever known for, this is what I have to do’” (Riedel, 2019).

The involvement of LeSesne and Bazant, along with the hands-on role of executive producer Cox as narrative guide, highlights the care taken by the cisgender director Gares in producing a documentary far removed from previous, arguably more Orientalizing, cis-controlled documentaries such as *Paris Is Burning* (1990). Of that celebrated documentary about the competitive drag balls of QTPOC communities in New York City, bell hooks questions the role of the white filmmaker, and how,

“Much of the individual testimony makes it appear that the characters are estranged from any community beyond themselves. Families, friends, etc., are not shown, which adds to the representation of these black gay men as cut off, living on the edge” (1992: 154).

According to hooks, community does not exist in *Paris is Burning* outside the competitive ballroom contests. Also absent from that documentary, claims hooks, is the evidence of solidarity or confidence of the subjects to reject the oppressions of “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (146). *Free CeCe!* by this analysis is a different type of documentary, in spite of the parallel of it being filmed by a white, cis-female filmmaker. Its alignment with McDonald’s general focus on the politics of her incarceration, as opposed to the story of her transitioning, her professional career, and her romantic relationships, is one indication of the subject’s involvement. Another is the role of Cox, who emphasizes the greater context to McDonald’s experience of the way trans women of colour face violence. Finally, there is the ambitious attempt to engage with myriad forms of oppression within a carceral-focused white-supremacist society. In her critique of Livingston’s documentary and its implicit relationship to power, hooks says,

“The whiteness celebrated in *Paris is Burning* is not just any old brand of whiteness but rather that brutal imperial ruling-class capitalist patriarchal whiteness that presents itself – its way of life – as the only meaningful life there is. What could be more reassuring to a white public fearful that marginalized disenfranchised black folks might rise any day now and make revolutionary black liberation struggle a reality than a documentary affirming that colonized, victimized, exploited, black folks are all too willing to be complicit in perpetuating the fantasy that ruling-class white culture is the quintessential site of unrestricted joy, freedom, power, and pleasure” (149).

If *Free CeCe!* lacks the narrow coherence of *Paris is Burning*, it also avoids the latter’s simplified isolation of QTPOC lives, in which disempowered individuals are seen to

yearn to escape their circumstances for the materially comforting safety of middle-class success or even fame and fortune, and desire nothing more. With *Free CeCe!* comes an almost bewildering array of different forms of oppressions experienced by the subject. This includes in relation to McDonald's family life growing up as a teenager, by the disinterest of mainstream LGBT+ groups nominally meant to support her, from white-supremacist violence in the streets, and also the violence of U.S. institutions against particular sections of its population, curated by mainstream media to appear necessary. In trying to cover so many forms of oppression encountered by McDonald, the result is a documentary arguably trying to do too much, but as a testimony that allows the audience to 'see' McDonald's experience and a broader community, its ambition is profound.

Conclusion

If Janet Mock's narrative is also a brand, then CeCe McDonald's story is part of a bigger picture involving social movements that demand structural changes to the U.S.A.'s classist and racist neoliberal society. The iconography of the Stonewall rioters Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, and Miss Major Griffin-Gracy is significant here: Mock regularly references them in her interviews especially; McDonald never does. Yet in terms of their ideas, demanding an end to police brutality and carceral justice, McDonald is the one consistently advocating their application. In this divide, we see a number of forces at play. One is the potential impact of class in alignment with race, another is the gatekeeping that decides who gets to be seen in mainstream discourse. It is also worth returning to Mock's statement, "I have been held up consistently as a token, as the 'right'

kind of trans woman (educated, able-bodied, attractive, articulate, heteronormative)” (2014: xvii). To this list of characteristics, one can add ideological conformity. McDonald embodies in her activism and through *Free CeCe!* a coalitional, communitarian project of numerous voices, one that subordinates the cult of the exceptional individual while combining resistance with ideas for structural change. On the one hand, it epitomizes Jack Halberstam’s ideal of a specific mode of Transgender Gaze, perhaps the most liberating kind, in which “the transgender body represents a Utopian vision of a world of subcultural possibilities” (2013: 129). Yet beyond this, it also indicates a different vision of society. To return to a deconstruction of neoliberalism referenced in the Introduction, Oscar Guardiola-Rivera describes the neoliberal “conception of human rights as purely individual rights claimed in advance of the state, and in particular rights to property and industry” (2013: 381). Yet he claims that there exists another vision too, which may be evident by different degrees in some of the texts analysed in this thesis. This vision sees “human rights as people’s rights, closer to the establishment of the right to self-determination and a moral politics of solidarity at the heart of Third World discourses of liberation.” Arguably, such a “moral politics of solidarity” is exemplified most clearly by *Free CeCe!* and the case of CeCe McDonald, and for this reason too, her story is a vital one among those identified by Aizura that make up “the enormous groundswell of transgender cultural production in the 2010s” (2018: 89).

Conclusions to Transgender Gaze, Neoliberal Haze

At the outset, this thesis argues that neoliberalism, understood as a hegemonic social, economic, and political discourse in the Anglophone Global North, impacts on trans female bodies, both in terms of representation and actual lives. The thesis acknowledges and develops, in this respect, the observation by Dan Irving within *Trans Studies* of how “hegemonic capitalism’s socioeconomic and political relations are reproduced vis-à-vis the transsexual body” (2013: 16). This thesis argues, chapter by chapter, that the trans female body can either embody or contradict “hegemonic capitalism’s socioeconomic and political relations,” and literary or filmic representations of trans women are accordingly either included or excluded from the mainstream, depending on the representation’s ideological complicity to neoliberalism. Concurrently, the trans female body does not depend on neoliberalism for its liberation, but rather, interacts with it when necessary, as with any other oppressive ideology.

In terms of those texts that appear to prosper and enjoy visibility within neoliberalism, this thesis argues that the majoritarian tendency of mainstream culture in the Anglophone Global North privileges and celebrates cisgender-produced representations of the trans female body. This is even as they reduce her to a vaguely realized, pathologized cipher – or alternatively, to a gay man – in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, or the hyper-feminine object of a cisgender castration fantasy in *The Danish Girl*. Yet this thesis also acknowledges the increasing welcome given to actual trans women within popular culture since around 2010, including in literature and film. This,

however, is on condition of ideological compatibility with neoliberal culture and its broadly remaining Cisgender Gaze. This includes the film *A Fantastic Woman* and its particular harnessing of upward mobility and private property as evidence of individual triumph by a cis-passing trans woman. More extensively, the literary output of Janet Mock, augmented by her media work, typifies this transgender equivalent of homonormativity. The concept, defined by Lisa Duggan, strategizes a mode of activism and citizenship that “does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (2002: 179). Added to Duggan’s conception, such texts and their critical and/or commercial popularity reflect Aren Aizura’s observation of how diversity is a key component of a trans-inclusive homonormativity in the Anglophone Global North, allowing for particular, new forms of trans female identity to enter the mainstream. Aizura notes in turn “a historical shift toward neoliberal multiculturalism in which trans people of color are championed as representatives of institutional diversity” (2018: 89). These kinds of ideologically compatible texts, including multiple media outputs from Mock, can be said to produce an affirming, feel-good narrative for the broader society. Several benefits to the neoliberal society of the Anglophone Global North in fact are apparent at this point: the neutrality and tolerance of the majority are affirmed; wealth and success is connected to endeavour; and prejudice and bias are limited to a few unsavoury individuals and their bigotry. At a political and economic level, such narratives can also be seen as affirming of how a meritocracy exists in which systems of wealth redistribution are already more than adequate. In alignment with the

analysis by Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade, these narratives “hide the uneven concentration of wealth, resources, and opportunity among different groups of people – the ways in which not everybody can just do anything if they put their minds to it and work hard enough” (2013: 659).

There is, therefore, an ideological, homonational value to such homonormative narratives, as conceptualized by Jasbir Puar, in which “lesbian, gay, and queer might become a hegemonic, neo-imperialist marker of Euro-American dominance within global circuits” (2017: 226). To these markers are the added ‘traits’ of racial/ethnic diversity, which further, paradoxically, signify the moral superiority of especially white-centred countries in the Anglophone Global North. Yet such narratives also feed into the daily, ideological construction of the neoliberal subject. Sujatha Fernandes identifies their affirmational value, used to disarm and depoliticize the stories of the already disempowered and integrate them romantically as uplifting tales of underdogs overcoming huge odds in their pursuit of happiness. These curated stories, according to Fernandes, include,

“principles of upward mobility, entrepreneurship, and self-reliance. They enter into a path of enlightenment and self-knowledge through the choices they make at key moments. Those who participate in this self-making often have aspirations of class mobility, due to their educational opportunities, niche position in the economy, or access to structures of funding” (2017: 11).

In contrast to these kinds of narratives, the thesis also analyses a series of texts that challenge such a narrative. The documentary *Miss Maria, Skirting the Mountain* highlights the value of community and grassroots-based awareness-raising, as opposed to

more individualistic solutions involving mobility, private property, and money. CeCe McDonald in the documentary *Free CeCe!* espouses prison abolition and speaks out against the racism of the prison industrial complex, while in their memoir *Trauma Queen*, Lovemme Corazon also calls out the U.S.A. for its debilitating white-supremacist underpinnings and its impact on mental health. With an array of literary weapons, Jamie Berrout utilizes fictional storytelling and polemical essay-writing that both critiques the U.S.A. as settler-colonial capitalism, and calls in turn for revolution.

Berrout's radical political positioning is especially worth addressing given its uncompromising nature. Her call for revolution, to be clear, is hardly that of a keyboard warrior trapped within the echo-chamber of an online forum, but instead, the fierce Voice of a trans woman of colour facing multiple structural barriers in the pursuit of happiness. Contrasted against the homonormative activism of Sarah McBride, as exemplified in McBride's memoir *Tomorrow Will Be Better*, Berrout's worldview exposes the huge fissures in our conception of a transgender movement, its agenda, and its objectives.

Yet it is at this point that McBride's advocacy of trans rights needs to be acknowledged too. Unlike the figure of the Human Rights Campaign spokesperson satirized by Berrout in the short story 'Mansion,' McBride's work as an advocate of trans rights has exposed her to virulent online attacks by anti-transgender activists. This includes the use of texting campaigns to encourage her to commit suicide (2018: 235), as well as video-filmed doorstepping by trans-exclusionary feminists – their journey to the U.S. funded by the conservative, anti-abortion, rightwing Heritage Foundation – and designed to publicly shame and demoralize her from supporting trans youth (Ash, 2019). In an era when trans rights appears constantly under attack in a new iteration of culture

war, including the rights of trans youth to receive support and healthcare, and to participate more broadly in society with dignity and confidence, the activism and advocacy work of McBride, as an emblem of mainstream trans activism, cannot be dismissed as merely elitist. The danger for this kind of thesis is to construct a binary of good and bad trans activism, and good and bad trans activists, related to class and race/ethnicity, disadvantage and privilege, at a time when most trans people to some degree live in a society undecided on their legitimacy.

In extension to a discussion on this fissure within trans activism, the youtuber and Oscar-Wildean trans female commentator, Natalie Wynn, on her show *ContraPoints*, constructs a dialogue between herself and her keyboard-warrior alter-ego, Tabby Chan, on the issue of voting Democrat in the 2020 Presidential election against Donald Trump, or withdrawing from voting altogether and advocating revolution. While the dialogue represents two white, middle-class figures, it arguably highlights the necessity of a trans activism that is inclusive of the single-issue activism too (Wynn, 9.40):

Tabby-Chan: But capitalism is the root of the problems with our world. The whole system is broken and voting won't change that. We don't need a Democrat, we need to end capitalism.

Natalie: Tabitha, capitalism is an epochal world economic order. When you say 'end capitalism,' you're talking about a tectonic shift in global politics that is so much bigger than all of us that I don't really understand what course of action you're recommending. Like, before capitalism, there was feudalism, and feudalism ended over hundreds of years of complex shifts in population and

production, not because people just decided it was time to end feudalism. So ... I don't think that's the kind of thing that can be accomplished by a small group of activists.

Back in 2012, I volunteered to work on the Obama campaign and ... I really recommend that leftists try doing this for at least one election, even though it is the worst thing in the world and I hated it so much ... [But] Talking to voters teaches you the hard realities of what your fellow Americans actually care about. And when I was canvassing, I did talk to some left-wing people, I talked to union families, but I don't think I talked to a single communist. You know, most people do not read theory. Most people are concerned primarily with themselves and their families. They want personal security and prosperity. And if you look at the talking points used by politicians, they reflect that. It's why the right hammers on about ANTIFA so much, because it works. Most people are afraid for their personal property and safety. And this idea of ANTIFA looters and riots, it scares the shit out of people.

But look, if what you want is socialism, or even social democracy, then you have a lot of work ahead of you in terms of outreach. You have to engage people, educate, raise awareness. But you don't want to do that, because it requires that you stop owning the libs and actually start communicating with them. You have to build alliances with Facebook moms who ask ignorant questions, like, 'What's

Indigenous People's Day?' and who think Kamala Harris making sassy faces is the height of praxis.

Tabby Chan: But, revolution. Revolution to end capitalism.

Natalie: Okay, so you're saying that your plan is to do a communist revolution and overthrow the US government? That's very valid. That's super-hecking valid. I mean, I guess I admire the ambition. Uh, just a couple of quick follow-up questions though. Are you counting on the US military and police taking the side of the communists? Or is your plan to overthrow them? Because unless you know something about the military that I don't, I don't think that much of the military is going to defect to join a communist revolution. So there will have to be a war. Revolution doesn't happen overnight.

So you are going to raise a Red Army ... So, how's that going, Tabitha? How many weapons have you amassed? How many units have you trained? ... Why are we talking about this?

To be clear again, the dialogue in *ContraPoints* addresses the online debates that happen in chat forums among implicitly white, millennial and Generation Z trans activists. Yet in highlighting the terrifying scale of revolution, we are reminded in Wynn's dialogue of the space between society as it currently exists, and the society aspired for. Moving from one to the other, in a radical transformation of the social, political, and economic realms, can be viewed as an epochal event involving not only human agency, but potentially, specific

conditions. Wynn's dialogue in addition identifies some of the forces with a stake in the status quo, including potentially the majority of the population, as well as those in power. The combining of activisms that pursue both a long-term vision and shorter-term goals involving protections of trans people, including their access to public/private facilities such as schools, healthcare, and employment rights, to name three areas, may necessarily involve a sharing of interests, rather than viewing these types of activism according to a mutually exclusionary binary. To conclude, there is arguably room in the advocacy of trans rights, for both a Sarah McBride and her powerful networks, and a Jamie Berrout and her disempowered community.

Future research possibilities: researching coalitional practice

Politically, this thesis shares the perspective of scholars within Trans Studies such as Dan Irving and Dean Spade, as well as researchers and commentators such as William Davies, Naomi Klein, George Monbiot, Angela Davis, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, in viewing neoliberalism as the catalyst for a destructive form of society, one that exacerbates inequality and dehumanizes socio-economically disempowered communities. Politically-organized resistance to it, however, at both a national and local level appears to suffer from the array of communities separated by class and race/ethnicity, to name two areas, which appear to lack a common political language – or at least, the mutual awareness of one – with which to unite. On the issue of political solidarity, Bassichis, Lee, and Spade say,

“Perhaps one of the most painful features of this period has been the separating of oppressed communities and movements from one another. Even though our communities are all overlapping and our struggles for liberation are fundamentally linked, the ‘divide and conquer’ strategy of the ‘New World Order’ has taught us to think of our identities and struggles as separate and competing” (660).

The fragmentation identified by Bassichis, Lee, and Spade, in relation to trans activism, is underlined by the findings in this thesis. Consistent with the idea of a socially acceptable, homonormative ‘right kind of trans woman’ is a recurring sense of a right kind of activism, which in turn occludes the needs and aspirations expressed by trans women of colour in North America. A fracture accordingly exists, between these disempowered communities and implicitly exclusionary, mainstream LGBT+ activist spaces, such as the Human Rights Campaign in the U.S.A. This is not to criticize such organizations outright, given their valuable advocacy work in the current climate of conservatism and populism fostered within parts of the political and media realms to challenge and remove trans rights including the right to healthcare. It is, however, necessary to acknowledge how such organizations tend to focus on especially middle-class-affecting issues, while ignoring more intersectional issues that do not directly affect especially middle-class, white trans people.

This fracture is apparent in a variety of ways, sometimes encouraging a change in practice, othertimes in ways that appear unfair or unrealistic. Of the latter, one of the qualities of Corazon’s memoir *Trauma Queen* is the revealing of call-out culture, including against grassroots, volunteer-based communities unable to satisfy the exact

demands of representations expected of them. More broadly, it can be argued that while Berrout's call for revolution is a reflection of the way structural oppression, such as the prison industrial complex, has no moderate solution but requires root and branch reform, the call for total societal transformation arguably disregards the broader conditions as they exist.

Nevertheless, a recurring theme of fracture cannot be dismissed, nor too the sense of dispossession and marginalization. This is clear when contrasting McBride's homonormative memoir with the satirical critique of the HRC by Jamie Berrout, as well as the fate of prison abolitionist CeCe McDonald. As mentioned in Chapter 6, McDonald condemns the HRC for its failure to support her particular case, itself a touchstone issue regarding carceral justice and the implicitly racist policies of the prison industrial complex in the U.S.A.

Broadly, the faultline appears to include two main strands, especially pertinent in North America but resonant also to the broader Anglophone Global North. The first involves the need to address institutional racism as an intersectional issue for trans people of colour, consistent with the historic legacy of QTPOC campaigning on issues such as prison abolition, defunding the police, and developing reparative/transformational justice systems and more equitable re-distribution and historic-based reparations to POC communities. The second strand is related to alternative perspectives of the State. As Paisley Currah notes, this includes a liberal perspective that views the State as a "neutral umpire," but also a more critical leftist perspective focused on addressing "the maldistribution of equality" (2014: 97). Recognizing the existence of these faultlines and different approaches to politics and activism appears pivotal if the better-resourced,

mainstream LGBT+ spaces are to address the current occlusion of particular communities and their separate activist goals.

Future research, in this respect, would be potentially invaluable to trans rights movements belonging to different communities. Research such as V Varun Chaudry's 'Trans/Coalitional Love-Politics' (2019) is an example of the kind of important work emerging in relation to issues of call-out culture, representation, and mutual aid within trans communities and in relation to allyship. More of this focus on coalitional politics and activism is clearly required, not least in addressing the gaps between mainstream LGBT+ organizations and the most vulnerable trans communities, but also, communities and organizations beyond LGBT+ advocacy. The lament expressed by Basshichis, Lee, and Spade, in this respect is worth returning to: "the separating of oppressed communities and movements from one another" and the "'divide and conquer' strategy of the 'New World Order.'" A next step is arguably to build on such work as Chaudry's with an attempt at healing and developing connections between mainstream and marginalized trans communities. This can include conducting the kind of research among a variety of trans-advocacy-based organizations that finds solutions to these fractures. If the present is characterized by fracture, then the future, perhaps, belongs to coalitions and ways of working together – if such ways can be found.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Correspondence with the distributor to purchase a copy of the documentary *Miss Maria, Skirting the Mountain*

Gina Maya <ginamaya75@gmail.com> Tue, May 7, 2019, 9:25 AM ☆ ↶

to [REDACTED]
De [REDACTED]

I want to purchase a copy of *Miss Maria, Skirting the Mountain* (Señorita Maria, la falda de la Montaña) for the University of Edinburgh.

I require the following information:

- 1) ISBN
- 2) Price

Please can you confirm these for me?

Best regards,

Gina
to me ▾

Dear Gina,
Thanks for your message.
If you're interested in acquiring a Bluray of the film for the University library, this is what we usually offer :

PUBLIC PERFORMANCE RIGHTS LICENSE – \$350 dollars

- Include the film in your library
- Make the film available to students, staff and faculty members for the purposes of research, education, and any other non-commercial use
- Hold a private, non-theatrical screening
- **This licence does not allow you to charge admission, or to sublicense, digitize or duplicate the film in any way**

PUBLIC PERFORMANCE (PPR) + DIGITAL SITE LICENSE (DSL) – \$650 per film

- Include the film on you digital server and in your library
- Allow your members to watch the film via a private, password-protected connection
- Make the film available to students, staff and faculty members for the purposes of research, education, and any other non-commercial use
- Hold a private, non-theatrical screening
- **This licence does not allow you to charge for viewing or for screening admission, or to sublicense, digitize or duplicate the film in any way**

For a Bluray, shipping charges will apply additionally, our lab is in Madrid, it might take 5 to 7 days for delivery. As an alternative, we can also provide a downloadable link of the FullHD english sub version of the film.

Looking forward to hear from you
All the best
M. C. S.