

Stolen-Valor – Cisgender Appropriation of Transgender Experiences in 2010s American Cinema

by

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Table of Contents

Abstract – Pag 3

Introduction – Page 4

The Danish Girl – Page 15

Dallas Buyers' Club – Page 25

Conclusion – Page 35

Works Cited – Page 42

Abstract

This paper will discuss instances of representation of transgender women in film of the 2010s as performed by and created by cisgender people, specifically *The Danish Girl* (2015) and *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013). The implications of these representations will be explored, elaborating upon the films' respective transgender characters and the transphobic implications that occur as a result of these narratives being created through a cisgender lens, with arguments of the film is intending to convey to a cisgender audience. Historical contexts will as well be explored to elaborate their ties to these modern works. As well, this paper considers the limitations of representation (and in turn, visibility) itself in the context of transgender liberation, and what "good" representation can mean for that.

Introduction

Media representation of a marginalized group often presents a singular idea of mainstream opinion towards that group. The keyword is here “marginalized,” and thus such media is potentially influenced by and often perpetuates the ideas and structures that oppress the group of people that it represents. The 2019 documentary *Disclosure* gives a surface level discussion of the history of transgender/trans—coded (the latter to say: media from before “transgender” was a mainstream term, but still reflecting concepts modernly interpreted similar enough to the transgender experience; gender deviance) depictions in American media going back to the beginning of the twentieth century. In *Disclosure*, transgender celebrities give their experiences of growing up seeing these depictions of gender deviance, and how it affected them directly and how they noticed how it matched the world around them. Laverne Cox, a transgender actress known for her role in *Orange is the New Black*, discusses how a media legacy of emasculating Black men would seep into transphobic treatment that she would experience. Speaking of the history of Black men being depicted as hyper-masculine (particularly in how they are presumed a threat to white women), Cox references how this emasculation “in some people’s minds takes away the threat” (13:45) in a way the audience is intended to laugh at. She recounts the countless times earlier in her transition where she “would walk into a subway car, and people would burst into laughter” (14:05), herself being an exhibit or spectacle for the cisgender people on the subway car too find entertaining. While Cox is certainly not a man, the dominant culture assumes an immutability of transgender people’s assigned sex at birth, and cissexism extrapolates this into a dangerous logic of “if the sex is male, therefore the person is a man.” When a transgender person begins their transition (whether it be medical, social, aesthetic, et cetera), they do not immediately (or potentially ever) become

immune to expectations of the gender they were designated to be at birth. This tension is what Cox describes in the example she provide, and her example shows how emasculation connects to transphobia, working against transgender people through spectacle. The emasculation is an act by a force outside the individua that ridicules their gender presentation and results in the subject being laughed at in public.

Examples of trans-coded media can be found even earlier than *Disclosure* examines, going as far back as the nineteenth century. Scholar C. Riley Snorton’s research on the history of transgender people does this work. In *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, Snorton describes the case of Mary Jones. She was charged with grand larceny (Snorton 58) with a lithograph created in 1836 both titled and naming Jones *The Man-Monster* (61) centering monstrosity in this depiction of a trans figure. She is labeled and restrained as “man,” her name listed as an alias with her birthname (a name understood more masculinely). This operates in conjunction with Snorton’s discussion of the ungendering of Blackness. Referring to Hortense Spillers’ *Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book*, Snorton elaborates “ungendering” as how “gender indefiniteness would become a critical modality of political and cultural maneuvering within figurations of blackness” (56), later elaborating how the lithograph depicts her as a “rather ordinary-looking woman” against the masculinizing title, saying how the “interplay [between them] worked to confirm a contemporaneous common sense about the fungibility of blackness, in which the interchangeability of gender figured one aspect of blackness’s capacity as it transversed captivity” (62). This media portrayal of Jones inevitably led to an interrogation of intimacy, with the publication *The Sun* suggested how she would fashion cow leather into something her clients could penetrate, leading then to an additional moniker of “Beefsteak Pete” (63). This is, of course, fell not only back to masculinizing Jones

with her name given at birth, but adding a term in reference to her supposed makeshift genitalia which ultimately acts as forcibly blending manhood and womanhood onto her (“not a real man anymore,” nor could be a woman). The framing Mary Jones was subject to is not unfamiliar to contemporary transphobic framings with restriction within one’s presumed sex assigned at birth and monstrosity still common cissexist frameworks. This demonstrates how cissexist depictions of transness is a trend that reaches back not decades, but centuries.

Representation in and of itself can indeed be beneficial. In a 2015 study conducted by Lauren B. McInroy and Shelley L. Craig, queer youth were interviewed for input regarding transgender representation in media. One of the interviewees, Andy, gave succinct explanation: “it’s easy to hate people when you’ve never seen them” (McInroy & Craig 610). Indeed, visibility is fundamental; the unknown cannot be liberated. Yet, the unknown can be incorrectly understood. The same study states “research has indicated that negative depictions frequently portrayed in offline media may have detrimental impacts” (McInroy & Craig 607). “Negative depictions” can be reasonably understood as such that rely on stereotypes and paint trans people in harmful light. Positive depictions, however, are a more complicated matter than simply avoiding stereotypes or choosing not to portray transgender people in a harmful light. Although, it is more common to find media more neutral or sympathetic to transgender individuals in the present day, most of this media produces new erasures. With this media, cisgender people are often the writer-creators and the actors playing transgender characters in movies, such as instances where a transgender woman would be played by a cisgender man. This project’s focus begins with a question: what are the effects of these performances?

The transgender body in these instances is reflective of how it is restrained to the sex it was assigned at birth. This principle is best elaborated by scholar Judith Butler in *Gender*

Trouble, where they ask if “‘the body’ itself [is] shaped by political forces with strategic interests in keeping that body bounded and constituted by the markers of sex” (129). In “Toward a More Transformative Approach: The Limits of Transgender Formal Equality,” Andrew Gilman elaborates on this, describing how transgender people depart from these politics of “sex as destiny,” noting “trans people reveal sex is the cultural inscription of meaning on human bodies and is not reflective of a binary biological truth about human experience” (91). In other words, “biological sex” is no less socially constructed than gender is, biology itself not being an innate truth which cannot be denied. The “political forces” Butler refers to constantly adjust what biology “proves” to best suit the benefit of the oppressor..

The Western preoccupation with biology continues to generate constructions of "new biologies" even as some of the old biological assumptions are being dislodged. In fact, in the Western experience, social construction and biological determinism have been two sides of the same coin, since both ideas continue to reinforce each other. When social categories like gender are constructed, new biologies of difference can be invented. When biological interpretations are found to be compelling, social categories do derive their legitimacy and power from biology. In short, the social and the biological feed on each other. (Oyěwùmí, 8-9)

In the casting of a cisgender man to play a transgender woman, the role is cast along the lines of sex assigned at birth, the strategic interest held by political forces being that of “transgender women are male,” and the political force being cissexism. “Cissexism” is a term used by trans scholars as Erica Lennon and Brian J. Mistler define cisgenderism:

...the cultural and systemic ideology that denies, denigrates, or pathologizes self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth as well as resulting behavior, expression, and community. (63)

In these contexts, there is a systemic denial based within the bounding by the markers of sex and subsequent systemic immutability of transgender people's sex, rendering them again unable to escape the initial assignment. Thus, this system determines no flaw in a cisgender man playing a transgender woman.

Butler explores a construction of gender through engagement with Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, understanding her text to consider if gender "be reduced to a form of choice," yet "always under a cultural compulsion to become one," elaborating that "the compulsion does not come from 'sex'" (8). This, again, calls to mind the notion of "biology" (and thus biological sex) not being an innate truth, with gender being much more culturally informed/enforced rather than such by sex. Kendall Gerdes explains gender performativity and its relation to the body more directly in her article "Performativity" in *TSQ: Trans Studies Quarterly*, stating how in such performance "the power...to make gender itself *take place* through bodies" (149). This is significant in placing the body as a medium of gender rather than a source. It is a resistance of the assignment of biological sex (something applied through observation of the body) as the gender determinant, and instead proposing the body act as a stage by which the individual's gender performs.

In the case that a transgender person is cast for the right role, what does this "successful representation" mean for trans liberation? Representation can "overshadow the ways in which recognition carries unique consequences for some trans people and not for others," Alex V Green states for BuzzFeed, noting "trans people in 2019 are incredibly visible." The approach of trans

inclusion (in lieu of trans *liberation*) relies on a mode of identity-based politics, placing representation and visibility as valuable tools that will improve trans life. Emmanuel David analyzes a pamphlet on trans visibility by the Human Rights Commission (a high-profile organization) and talks about how it represents an “[incorporation of] trans issues into their neoliberal discourses of individualism, privatization, and the retreat from the social” (29). There are questions that must be asked of the how visibility improves trans life: how much, in what ways, and for which trans people? To confront trans liberation, one will come to confront capitalism, the system that produces these representations. Media with trans representation is a product/commodity, often commodifying transness itself. As society is forced to recognize transgender life, a new market is now in capitalism’s grasp, quickly catered to for profit, which results in transgender products; “trans visibility is often tied to the courting of trans dollar” (David 30). When considering the understandable desire to see yourself within the media you consume, capitalism will supply this demand with the product of approachable (as opposed to malicious) media containing transgender characters. This demand, however, is manipulated by capitalism to shape and form a certain kind of transness that is palatable and profitable, which then feeds into societal opinion on transgender people.

A particular focus on transgender activism distinct from “LGBT” activism proves itself necessary from the path (cisgender) gay and (cisgender) lesbian activism would show. K. L. Broad’s “GLB+T?: Gender/Sexuality Movements and Transgender Collective Identity (De)Constructions” discusses how trans politics acts as “neither identity politics *nor* queer politics, and also both” (262). Trans politics being queer politics is an inevitability; queerness as a categorization of gender and sexual minorities by semantics involves transgender life in its politics. Divides, however, can be noted in late twentieth century queer life. Broad quotes

interviews of trans people observing perceptions of transness in cisgender queer individuals, such as how “the butch dykes get all defensive” (250) in the context of (medical) transition, and trans women observing explicit exclusion in how “the gay and lesbian community doesn’t want the MTF/transwoman in the lesbian coming out group” (256). It is important to reiterate these quotes are from prior to the turn of the millennium, and there is no intent to imply these standards are as commonplace in queer life in the modern era. Rather, these circumstances set the stage for the necessity of politics with a specific focus on transgender individuals. The acronym “LGBT” and its variations does a historically significant grouping of marginalized peoples, but it should be warned not to presume too much overlap when it comes to cisgender queer individuals and transgender individuals. After all, those of the former are not adequate storytellers of the experiences of the latter (a presumption that a non-queer person may make, due to both cisgender queer individuals and transgender individuals both sharing the umbrella grouping of queer/LGBT community).

For the earlier question of “which trans people?” consider the “transgender umbrella” and its affect. “Trans representation” is such a simple term, yet representation of transgender women has less of impact on the life of transgender men and genders that are non-binary compared to transgender women. “Transgender” refers to such an incredible variety of experiences and needs that while overlap exists, the places where there is none are crucial. This is before considering intersections of disability, race, class, sexuality, et cetera. Megan Davidson discusses this umbrella and its flaws in *Sexuality Research & Social Policy: Journal of NSRC*. Whilst interviewing activists, Davidson reports their criticisms of the term “transgender” as a class, “how it brings together different identities under one political and social umbrella” (64). This alludes to how the modes of “progress” that get the most support from outside that umbrella are

those that cisgender people would find most comfortable and easy to understand. While understating has improved since this conference, Davidson discusses a 2004 conference titled “FTM: A Gender Odyssey,” in which a community discussion around the term “genderqueer” occurred, expressing concern of “exclusion of genderqueer people from the trans umbrella” (70).

Homosexuality exists as a subject frequently referenced to in trans narratives but not in any capacity of it being modernly understood as colloquially synonymous with “gay” (same gendered attraction) but specifically same sex attraction. This same sex attraction when insisted upon a trans narrative operates in the framework of immutable sex, for example saying that a transgender woman is male. This is not to say that depictions of transgender women expressing attraction to men is an inherent implication of homosexuality, but that the insistence of cisgender creators of such transgender women is an application of homosexuality. This is especially the case in instances by which a transgender woman in a role by cisgender creators ceases expressing any attraction towards women upon crossing an unspoken threshold in transitioning (such a case is present in the Tom Hooper film *The Danish Girl* and will be elaborated upon later).

A potential reaction to this conflation (and subsequent connection) between transness and homosexuality could be “so what?” Modern discourse rightfully dictates that being homosexual (which, as stated, is colloquially understood to be synonymous with “gay”) is acceptable, so why would it be criticized for there to be a link between such in modern media? As mentioned before, this is an insisted framing performed without proper consultation or consideration of any transgender subject, as well as insisting that the sex of a trans individual is immutable. However, one must also consult the same history that theories such as “sexual inversion” emerge from, a history that refers to homosexuality as a pathology of the “other,” a “condition” that which must

be cured. This history would officially last in the United States until 1973, when “homosexuality” was removed as a diagnosis from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (Drescher 565).

Theories within this framework have been proposed by those such as Sigmund Freud. His infamous Oedipus complex theory dictates if a boy fails to “identify with the father...he will develop a weakened ego, not strong enough to seek a love object in females... [and develop] homosexuality” (Phelan 344). Another such theory (and one that connects more directly to transness) is that of sexual inversion, proposed in the late 19th century by Havelock Ellis, and developed in works by Karl Heinrich Ulrich. This theory of “sexual inversion” as interpreted by Joseph Gamble’s reading of Ulrich states that “a homosexual ‘man’... is actually a woman trapped in a man’s body: an anima muliebris virili corpore inclusa” (32). This theory of homosexuality inevitably acts as a theory of transness, thus predicting a cultural tie between male homosexuality and transfemininity. Trans scholar Jay Prosser argues “sexual inversion *was* transgender” (117), while Gamble suggests this might be too strict of an interpretation. Instead, he agrees with Prosser’s broader suggestion of “homosexuality and transgender...emerging at the same time and in the same places” (33). This suggestion indeed is more apt, as sexual inversion is described by Ellis as “sexual instinct turned by inborn constitutional abnormality toward persons of the same sex” (1), demonstrating the theory’s primary concern being homosexuality. It should be noted that Ellis considers this “a narrower term of homosexuality” (1), particularly discussing it as a “subcategory” so-to-speak of homosexuality. Nonetheless, sexual inversion’s primary concern was that of same-sex attraction, with the notion of “a woman trapped in a man’s body” (one that, in these exact words, is still used today to describe trans womanhood, vice versa for trans manhood, and with no proper analog for transness aside these

two genders) being an afterward, theoretical justification for it. This status of being an afterthought is what politically solidified transness as a condition of homosexuality, rather than a concept in and of itself. Ultimately, these theories sought to find a “cause” of that “problem” (of homosexuality) so that it may be diagnosed, studied, and “cured” as a disease.

It is worth noting there are more nuanced instances and discussions of “homosexuality” (less so strictly “same-sex attraction,” more so the cultural communities that evolved from such relations; gay communities) and transness, such as trans masculinity in lesbian communities. Such is discussed by Jack Halberstam in *Female Masculinity*, with one line offering a simple reporting of “once they have transitioned, many transsexual men want to maintain their ties to their queer lesbian communities” (150). It is this “maintenance” that is core to this potential for such ties between trans identity and gay community, in that a pre-established connection to lesbian community is not severed upon transition. Another transgender man says, “he never really identified as female but that he did “identif[y] as a lesbian for a while”” (150), presenting a distinction of the lesbian identity separate from one necessitated in femaleness. Halberstam uses the term “transsexual” in his text from 1998 as that terminology was more broadly utilized then. For our contemporary discourse however, it is considered archaic with many individuals offering specific yet varied possible definitions for it. As such, it will not be used for this paper. The framework for these instances is gay identity functioning not as a synonym for “homosexual,” but rather a culturally informed identity, based within community and history. This is to say, for example, that a “lesbian” should not be considered simply “a homosexual woman,” but rather an individual who finds identification with such community and history of individuals that claim “lesbian.” Such nuance with potentiality for intersection of gay identity and transness is not what was being discussed by sexual inversion theologians nor what the following media to be

examined is deemed to be engaging with. Instead, it is mentioned for posterity, as it is important to resist strict assumptions of mutual exclusivity of “homosexuality”/gay identity and transness from following arguments, and awareness for potentiality in how one parses their transness and/or gay identity.

The Danish Girl

Tom Hooper's film *The Danish Girl* (2015) is one of the more recent examples of the cisgender grasp (let alone the cisgender gaze) on transgender narratives. As a movie directed by a cisgender man, starring a cisgender man as the titular Danish girl and based on a novel written by a cisgender man, it delivers a narrative of transness cloaked through many layers of cisness. One of the most significant framings comes from of the film's layerings of cisness through a tragic/victim lens, is with Gerda Wegener, wife of titular character Lili (played by Eddie Redmayne), portrayed as nearly equal parts a victim of the circumstances, save for Lili's untimely demise. Based on a real person, the film follows Lili Elbe realizing her transness and exploring a new identity as "Lili," yet with her and her wife trying to find a "cure" for this, with the couple conflicting with each other over Lili's transness. She eventually meets a doctor who understands her state and offers surgery to give her a vagina and womb. She accepts, and while the first procedure is a success, she dies of complications following the second. Lili's own struggles are as well portrayed problematically for a film that must be acknowledged in operation as a piece which informs present day cisgender audiences' perceptions and assumptions of transgender experiences. This acknowledgement is key in confronting the film's choices made for the sake of supposed historical accuracy alongside its neglect of other histories of Lili Elbe's life. These perceptions and assumptions which the movie takes no effort to combat are such of compulsive heterosexuality, bioessentialism, fetishization, and a pathologizing of transness (particularly to a mode of mental illness).

Ever present throughout the film is Gerda's own loss of her "husband" through Lili's transition, mourning as if a man she has married has died. This can only begin to work within the context of Gerda being assuredly heterosexual, whilst Gerda's sexuality is historically more

ambiguous. While no assured declaration of Gerda's sexuality will be made, it is important to question the film's own assured declaration to be upon heterosexuality. As a talented artist, as the film does reflect, much of her work noted by Nicholas Chare was "frequently lesbian themed," with one series "predominantly [depicting] scenes of lesbian lovemaking" (356). Chare continues to make the not unreasonable suggestion of considering Gerda's many portraits of Lili within Gerda's sapphic potential (356). This potential is neglected entirely in the film, instead favoring a more heterosexual framing that could more potentiate such strife, yet certainly does not necessitate it. Nevertheless, the film centers this heterosexual framing of Gerda. A scene that exemplifies this is after Lili declines joining Gerda to a gathering due to not feeling comfortable pretending to be a man nor safe going as herself. Gerda returns home, visibly upset with Lili, and pleads for "her husband," as if speaking of a third, absent person, she says "I need to talk to my husband. I need to hold my husband. I need him. Can't you just get him? Can you at least try?" (1:11:37-1:11:52) This strife between is ever present, with Lili's yearning for a genuine self-framed selfishly for most of the film, with Gerda lightening up only towards the movie's final act, yet only in the regard of Lili no longer living as Einar, tensions still notably high until her health is in crisis. This is another historical inaccuracy that serves as a transphobic framing. To return to Chare, he discusses the much more amicable relationship that Gerda and Lili sustained together, the many portraits the former made of Lili made to be "tender, loving, [and] yearning" (356), acting as what he calls a "counter narrative" (367) to insistence of Gerda's heterosexuality. It is worth noting, however, a historical ambiguity towards Lili's own sexuality, Nerissa Gailey and AD Brown note a "clear disjunction...between what is expressed regarding Elbe's sexuality in the memoir and what is portrayed in Gerda Wegener's paintings," which they

suggest was due to “the culture climate...becoming increasingly conservative,” and how Gerda “would certainly have had an interest in how the story was presented” (70-71).

The couple did, indeed, cease their marriage, with Gerda coupling with another man, but creative liberties were taken when it came to the novelization of Lili’s life, with further ones taken in the Tom Hooper film. The fictional account by David Ebershoff creates Hans Axgil as an art dealer who was a childhood of Lili’s to substitute Fernando Porta, a substitution maintained by Hooper’s film. Fernando was not a friend of Lili’s as Hans was, instead he and Gerda married the same year of Lili’s death. However, the actual end of Gerda and Lili’s marriage was not one necessitated by strain such as seen within the film, but an amicable divorce (followed by separation) mandated by legal standards. Lili’s transition being legally recognized as a sex change made her marriage to Gerda a same-sex marriage, subsequently legally mandating their separation under Danish law. This is much less dramatic, certainly, and it is understandable that one would wish a story to be dramatic to keep audience engagement. However, this rewritten depiction of the end of their marriage as seen in the film instead relies on much more negative, painful contexts, constructing and centering their companionship soured through Lili’s transition.

The introduction of Hans is one that brings with it an introduction of early queerness within Lili’s early childhood. In their childhood, Lili and Hans kissed, and during a period of her life in which she was living her life as a boy, thus portraying this as a homosexual act. This is especially so in the cisgender gaze, as cissexist interpretations of transition consider a medical transition to be a firm divide between the life on one side of binary to the other. This is to say that in a trans woman’s case, she was very much a man until she medically transitioned (particularly a procedure surgically modifying her genitalia), after which she was woman (it is

worth noting that some trans people would describe themselves as experiencing such a divide, and Lili seems to be such a case; this will be discussed further). Such a scope, combined with bioessentialist heteronormativity, is one that leads to cissexist presumptions of a connection between “male” homosexuality (i.e., a person assigned at birth to be male being attracted to other such individuals) and being transgender. This is a scope referenced in the film, during a portion in which Lili seeks consultations from various doctors, with one concluding to her rather simply “...I’m afraid it’s not good news. You’re a homosexual” (1:20:03). This is utilized more broadly a few minutes earlier in the film when she does independent research, flipping through a book titled *A Scientific Study, of Sexual Immorality* (1:16:08). It is crucial to recognize how homosexuality is indeed framed as an unfortunate immorality during this time period, connecting this research of “sexual immorality” with the later diagnosis of homosexuality being “not good news.”

Conflation of trans femininity and male homosexuality is continued in the only other person Lili is portrayed to have any potentially intimate companionship within the film, a man named Henrik who once attempted to court her when she first went out as herself. She would seem him second time, in which he calls her “Einar” (43:12), thus revealing how he was fully aware of who Lili was, pursuing her with this knowledge. This is peculiar and exceptional, as no one else at the party was able to see through the façade of they laid of Lili being Einar’s cousin (27:29), with the exception of Ulla, who is the one who gives Lili her name in the film, after Lili dons the clothing meant for her in the painting Gerda was working on of Ulla. In fact, Lili is presumed to be a cisgender woman in every public outing she makes as herself. While exceptions are surely possible, Henrik being the sole other individual to recognize Lili when she is dressed as Lili (aside from Hans, who has much more context of Lili’s personhood) is

questionable, particularly within the context of Henrik being a fabricated character, so his knowledge is equally fabricated.

These first two interactions are confirmed to have been homosexual at this later point when Gerda sees Lili with Henrik, Lili later assuring Gerda that “it’s not like that, [he’s] a homosexual” (1:40:29). As with Gerda, this is a reframing of historic circumstances shifting the ambiguity of sexuality (as discussed by Gailey and Brown into more concrete and problematic territories), and as with Hans, Henrik is created by Ebershoff and maintained in the film. Henrik takes the place of Claude Lejeune as Lili’s companion after her divorce from Gerda, Claude himself being a man of whom Helen Parker in the foreword to *Lili: A Portrait of the First Sex Change* writes “the love Lili had for [him] and he for her...” (Parker Foreword). Just as with Gerda’s own sexuality, Claude’s sexuality is indeed not conclusive within any historical account, but instead of a conclusion being suggested, he is substituted entirely with Henrik, a character whose sexuality is declared “homosexual.” With Lili’s assurance towards Gerda of it being “not like [an intimate relationship]” (1:40:29), his homosexuality is presented as counter-intuitive to any potential for an intimate relationship. Yet the movie presents this as an apparent inconsistency, as Henrik has shown himself very attracted to Lili, kissing her two of the times he gets her alone. If it is indeed not like that, then why was he so eager to court her? While there are a variety of nuances in lived queer experiences that could provide answers and exceptions (cultural “homosexuality” and transness), the film is certainly not interested in such, and this must be considered when confronting the fact that Lili’s only particularly intimate (and with a history of such) companion after Gerda is a man declared to be homosexual. In not engaging with nuances of lived queer experiences, it leaves a question as to why Henrik’s homosexuality allowed him to be attracted to Lili before her surgery but not after. The second time Lili and

Henrik meet in private and kiss, the latter attempts to escalate their encounter, during which he calls Lili “Einar,” assures her following her confusion, and immediately takes to calling her “Lili” again as she storms away (43:16-43:45). This tells the viewer that Henrik is aware that Lili is not a cisgender woman, instead believing her to be a cisgender man dressed as a woman. In such a context, his homosexual attraction to Lili is potentially “justified” within the movie’s scope. It is only after Lili has her penis removed that the potential for courtship is apparently lost, Lili citing Henrik’s homosexuality as to why there is none. While Lili’s surgical procedures are two separate events in the film (penile removal and vaginoplasty) she is still positioned as viable for a homosexual man before a bottom surgery, but not afterwards. This places homosexuality (at least in the case of Henrik) as genital based, as Lili’s aesthetics do not have any drastic shift after having her penis removed.

Likewise in terms of “possible, yet suspiciously implemented” is the fact itself that Lili is presumed to be a cisgender woman in every public outing as herself. This is not to imply that a trans woman at a point of transition such as Lili is in for most of the film being presumed cisgender is not possible, but rather to interrogate why the film chooses such circumstances. It should be noted that Lili herself acknowledged in her own account that as herself, “not a soul took notice of her” (Chapter 8). However, this is something she notes in the memoir, compared to the movie presenting Lili’s transness as undetectable, immediately. This contradicts with how the film portrays Lili as somewhat rather inauthentic for most of the film, her first outing as Lili requiring literal rehearsal with Gerda (24:46), another instance where she is observing a woman at a market to mimic her mannerisms (25:05), and a final time where she pays for a strip performance to again mirror the woman’s mannerisms (56:06-58:00). As well, the film has Lili wearing a wig whenever presenting as herself, (which is to imply “fake” hair). All these

instances present transgender womanhood to the viewer as being merely in emulation of cisgender womanhood, thus not wholly authentic: merely an inauthentic performance of an authentic source. The problematic nature of this comes from consideration of the cisgender gaze by which the film is being watched/presented, where the “cisgender” of cisgender womanhood is understood as “real” or “regular” or “actual,” thus denying authenticity of transgender womanhood. Transphobia aside, this is as well an unrealistic hierarchy of “mimicry,” for the sake of two reasons. The first of which is from challenging the notion that the cisgender womanhood owes any inherent authenticity to the gender of “woman,” as woman is relative. As Butler establishes in *Gender Trouble*, it is, as a gender, “always relative to the constructed relations in which it is determined;” there is no “substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations” (10). This is reiterated in *Undoing Gender*, where Butler notes how “the origin is understood to be as performative as the copy” (209). The takeaway here is cisgender womanhood is based within as much mimicry and performance as transgender womanhood, whereas the key difference is the former has a head start in the matter, by the sake of being assigned that performance at birth to rehearse throughout life.

The Danish Girl is, however, generous enough to eventually frame Lili as “equal” amongst cisgender women on its own terms. This point is after she undergoes one half of a “sexual reassignment surgery” in which her penis and testicles are removed (yet only removed, nothing new constructed) (1:32:19). She is shown working as a perfume salesperson, the initial shot we see of her starting this job positioning her literally among similarly uniformed, cisgender women (1:34:23). The same scene later has Lili’s coworkers noting how she “unfairly” has “the narrowest waist” (1:35:10), thus thrusting her from a position of a paltry imitation of cisgender

women to now being the object of their envy. Additionally, she is no longer wearing a wig, shedding another “fake performance” of herself and now her own grown hair is the approximate length and style of what she was “emulating.” By the film’s own volition, Lili is now (for the most part, it is sure to note; she has the secondary surgery to undergo) a proper woman.

The Danish Girl overall acts as a piece of fiction by which the audience is meant to not merely sympathize with but pity its transgender subject. This is done through focusing on traumatic events in her life, making it occasionally feel like a revolving door of strife. One may attempt to justify this as a need for conflict to exist in a story to keep the audience engaged and ensure that the drama is entertaining. This blended with making the story center around transitioning itself could indeed lead to transphobic beats in the story, but again, the cisgender gaze struggles with doing this consideration justice. Indeed, *Danish Girl* goes for the almost necessitated transphobic beat(ing), subjecting Lili to physical assault (1:16:46). This occurs not when one might expect (while not conforming to her gender assigned at birth), but indeed wearing slacks and forgoing a wig she would wear. Nonetheless, the attack is done with harassing inquiries of “are you a boy or a girl?” (1:16:37). Despite her mannerisms having shifted since the beginning of the film, she still aesthetically looks as she did for most of the film. In *Lili: A Portrait of the First Sex Change*, she indeed accounts being stared at while wearing men’s clothing, though saying “people took me for a girl masquerading as a man” (Chapter 8). While the film does not discredit this possibility, it still rolls back instead the harassment of gender ambiguity. More crucial, however, is how the film amplifies the harassment from the discomforting glares Lili recounted in the memoir to physical, scarring violence, delivering to the audience another opportunity of pity through that of brutal violence against a trans woman.

The ultimate instance of this is the mere fact that the film concludes with Lili's death, portrayed with Gerda tearfully clutching her hand (1:50:15). Lili's untimely demise following complications from her vaginoplasty is indeed historically accurate, but though Lili had separated from Gerda at this time, the film extends their marriage to her death. This creative choice is one by the director, Tom Hooper, even being a notable difference from the David Ebershoff novel. Hooper explains in an interview with IndieWire his prioritization of centering Lili and Gerda to "protect importance of their relationship" (Puchko). This combined with other previously discussed creative liberties taken makes Lili's death to be a logical conclusion of Gerda having already been mourning the "loss" of her partner for the majority of the film. The enforcement of Gerda as the deuteragonist leads her to be a character not only to sympathize with, but to relate to (contrasting to the pitiable sympathy with Lili). Gerda's reactions of fear and agony are reactions a cisgender audience could expect one to have in her position, while Lili's journey is an "unknown," yet acknowledged as a strenuous one, shown in Ebershoff referring to her as "so courageous" (EarthAngel), a reference that continues to be used by over eager cisgender allies. Not only does Lili's path lead to her own tragic death, but Gerda's own grief is "collateral damage" of Lili's circumstances, such that the film felt necessary to pay particular attention to and portray as inevitable. While the viewer is led to interpret the title of *The Danish Girl* (particularly the film) as in reference to Lili (interestingly restraining within "girl" and not "woman" despite being almost 40 when she started living as Lili), it could just as well refer to Gerda, as her own conflicts with Lili's transition are centered nearly as much as Lili's transition itself.

The cisgender participants in creating this film were not acting in malice, as Lili would be less pitiful and more unsympathetic were that the case. None of the cast and crew would seem to

have any grudge towards Lili, shown of course by kind words they have used in reference to her story. Eddie Redmayne speaks in an interview with CinemaBlend about consulting Lana Wachowski, a transgender film director, while working with her for where to start with research, as well as meeting women from the trans community to further broaden consideration (Wakeman). Intent, however, is not the ultimate determinant of proper representation, rather the effect. It is not what was meant to be done, but what was done and how it was done. This is a recurring theme in any sort of allyship, of which such a film is, ultimately, an attempted act of.

Dallas Buyers Club

The 2013 film *Dallas Buyers Club* has its transgender character as the deuteragonist of the film to its cisgender protagonist, vice-versa to *The Danish Girl* having Lili as the protagonist. Quite literally, Rayon is *Dallas Buyers Club*'s transgender character in that she is not based on any real person but rather created just for the film (which itself is based off the final years of Ron Woodroof, a cisgender heterosexual man diagnosed with HIV). She is fabricated, just as the fiber of the same name, Rayon is synthetic, fabricated by people to be utilized. The reason for this fabrication is to give the film's protagonist Ron a "dramatic challenge to his prejudices while facing disease" (Harris). Utilizing a transgender woman as the contrast to Ron, the two are tied through their status of being HIV positive. HIV/AIDS still today has associations of being the "gay" virus, stemming back the original acronym being GRID for Gay Related Immune Deficiency. Because of this association, the viewer would need Ron to act as the bridge between their likely cisgender/heterosexual selves and the "gay" HIV because homosexuality is "othered," therefore a cisgender/heterosexual viewer would not be able to relate. Ron Woodroof is a cisgender man who prides himself on his machismo, his proud heterosexuality noted by his friend who "know[s he's] got a pussy addiction" in response to the suggestion that his HIV diagnosis is true (again, due to it being the "gay" virus) (14:50). Rayon, on the other hand is a transgender woman of ambiguous sexuality. Particularly with considerations of frameworks of transness being derived through (or inherently connected to) homosexuality (sexual inversion), this sets Rayon as the ultimate faggot to contrast to Ron's butch, cisgender masculinity. This is to say, she is a character to be interpreted as the farthest possible from Ron, within the axis of gender and sexuality.

While Rayon is elaborated here as a transgender woman and referred to with she/her pronouns, no character in the film utters the word “transgender” or any similar vocabulary, and she is as well only referred to with he/him pronouns. For the purposes of this paper, quotes from the movie which refer to her with “he” or “him” will be adjusted to “she” or “her,” accordingly. While countless articles/interviews about the film describe her as transgender and the film’s own official website describes her as a transsexual (note: not as an adjective such as “transsexual woman,” but the ungendered noun “transsexual”), this is not a consideration placed within the film. In her introductory scene, she can certainly be interpreted as an extremely flamboyant and feminine gay man, being adorned in a pink robe with a face of noticeable, pink makeup, and her hair wrapped in a scarf (31:03). Characters that are more assuredly transvestites (a person dressing in clothes associated with that of the binary gender opposite their own, particularly a cisgender person) are no stranger to cinema, such as Nathan Lane’s performance as Albert Goldman in the 1996 film *The Bird Cage*. Ron and Rayon play cards together, during which he casually calls her “Miss Man” (32:13), and she does not argue this. She later alleviates a leg cramp Ron gets, and beginning to compliment his feet, he recoils and says “Jesus Christ, I’m straight, alright?” (33:30), to which she simply turns to return her pack of playing cards to her bag. She has a close yet platonic relationship with Dr. Eve Saks, possibly following a media trope of gay men being close friends with straight women (“gay best friend”). As well, when they are at a bar together, Ron tells Ray to “stop staring at [the bartender’s] tits, you’re starting to look normal” (1:21:53), “normal” being used to mean heterosexual (and implicitly cisgender). However, these are not instances that would discredit transgender potential, but instead have multiple justifications of such. Rayon could simply be accepting these relegations of male homosexuality for not wishing to debate her gender (an understandably stressful situation, even

amongst presumably friendly peers). The film could be also invoking the sexual inversion theory of homosexuality, or, most simply, she could view her gender and sexuality as not incompatible with cultures and tropes of male homosexuality (not unlike the trans masculine lesbians discussed by Jack Halberstam). To discredit the last option entirely would be unrealistic, yet it is questionable if the movie could be trusted to apply such nuance, especially with a transgender character created entirely within cisgender confines. Therefore, the most likely scenario would be a of the first two, with the cultural crossover of transgender women and gay male culture present yet invoked through cisgender biases stemming from sexual inversion.

This is all, of course, discussion of themes that can apply well to a cisgender, homosexual character. While Rayon's transness is never directly declared in the film, she is instead "trans coded," which is to say that the film composes her transness through dialogue and aesthetic decisions without that transness being said/spoken outright. These are not mere circumstances of "hints," but indeed instances that would not occur to a cisgender character. It is important to note that "trans coded" (and "queer coded," more broadly) is often used within a realm of plausible deniability, where a keen eye would note references and gestures of a character that could suggest a character to be transgender (or queer). This is a significant concept, especially when analyzing older media, because the plausible deniability may have resulted from the creator being limited by a benefactor or societal expectations. Because of this limitation, plausible deniability is invoked for safety, and "coding" is hoped to be "decoded" by likeminded individuals to form community/solidarity of sorts. Additionally, it can offer expanded readings of media within which no code was written but which is still be found by the viewer's own desire for expanded depth of characters. This is all mentioned for posterity, however, as this is certainly not the case for *Dallas Buyers Club*. Rayon's trans coding is of a more explicit variety, the film

all but saying “transgender” or even “transsexual.” The mentioned scene of her admiring the bartender’s breasts was not one necessarily of Rayon’s sexual desire, but rather of envy. While Ron does scold her at the end as if she desires the bartender, she asks him moments earlier “How about that size, huh? I think they’d look nice on me” (1:21:23), to which Ron shoots down her half-serious inquiry about getting breast implants. Earlier in the film in another side-quip Ron jokingly threatens Rayon with his gun, saying “I’m going to use this to give you that sex change you’ve been hoping for” (54:30). This line even suggests the film is following a bioessentialist concept *The Danish Girl* invokes, i.e. both films use “he/him” to refer to their respective trans feminine characters while they still have their penis with the exception of *The Danish Girl* referring to Lili with “she/her” with a framing of her being a separate individual entirely. Additionally, as Lili’s surgical procedure was life ending, Rayon’s hypothetical surgical procedure is likened to a life threatening event, both films suggesting death as inherent to such surgery.

In one of her last few scenes before her death, Rayon is put through what seems almost a mandatory trope for queer characters of any sort to go through: confronting the disapproving parent. Here, the audience learns that Rayon is a chosen name, her father asking her an impatient “what do you want, Raymond?” The chosen name, especially one that she goes by fulltime (compared to a name a drag performer would use when in drag), is the other instance in the film that solidifies Rayon is to be understood as transgender, alongside the reference to her desire of “a sex change” (rather, a vaginoplasty). More lightheartedly comedic lines of dialogue as well allude to Rayon’s womanhood, such as interrogating Ron as he walked from the bathroom with “you put the seat down?” (1:20:32), a comedic quip since the commonly heard question comes from cisgender typical bathroom usage but is not unapplicable to Rayon. To extend the character

role of Rayon to serve Ron's character development, Rayon herself acts in assistance to Ron through stereotypical modes of womanhood, almost as if she is his housewife or secretary. Ron is always portrayed as the head of the operations of the Club (Rayon relegated to only a 25% cut, already). He is also the one who travels around the world for the work (although this could be seen as for Rayon's safety, as her traveling internationally alone as a transgender woman would not be as safe as it would be for Ron). Instead, we see her packing his bags for him for this travel (1:00:31) (hence housewife), being the one to answer phone calls to then potentially direct to Ron (1:07:25) (hence secretary), and making coffee for him as his beck and call (55:34) (a little bit of both). The only essence of womanhood that the film is willing to offer to Rayon is in the form of stereotypes.

With Rayon's transness established, it still is questionable that she is referred to with "he/him" throughout the film. It may be following the "rule" of containing a trans woman within "male" codes as long as she has a penis, or it may be the writers thinking it appropriate as a period piece. However, the television popular series *Pose*, which takes place only two years after, has no such standards. A fair point would be that *Pose* and its characters are fictional, merely deriving from history, so liberties may be taken. However, Rayon herself is fictional, equally fabricated yet within confines of cisgender creativity. This inevitably leads to her portrayal being that serves more to cisgender feelings of allyship rather than anything else, only highlighted further by her creation being simply as a means of Ron's progress past his homophobia (and subsequent transphobia).

This is utilization is portrayed best in a scene which he is grocery shopping with her and runs into his friend T.J., who along with others severed his friendship with him earlier in the film, as the group now considering Ron "tainted" due to his HIV diagnosis (22:37-23:52). This

reunion is on civil terms until T.J. spots Rayon, exclaiming to Ron (in what he believes to be in camaraderie) “Jesus, fucking faggots everywhere” (58:05). Rayon here is a “problem” in public, but this categorization is recognized as unjust oppression. This recognition, however, serves to present an opportunity for Ron, the cisgender protagonist that the audience is to be warming up to, to act as a “hero” to Rayon. Rayon offers a handshake in a gesture of courtesy, and when T.J. refuses, Ron insists with “[she] said hi to you, shake [her] hand” (58:17). As the tension escalates with T.J. about to leave with departing profanity, Ron grabs him, puts him in a choke hold, and forces him to shake her hand (58:30-58:52). He then casually (yet humbly, as a just hero should) resumes shopping, with Rayon smiling in appreciation (59:12-59:28). This entire scene acts as the ideal scenario of a “cisgender savior” fantasy, one in which Ron is a model of allyship for a cisgender audience to applaud. However, the circumstances are more concerning circumstances, and the scene succeeded only because it exists to have a cisgender hero. While not as helplessly forced as the transphobic villain of the scene, Rayon is herself coerced to shake the hand of a man who was just moments before glaring at her in festering disgust, uncomfortably getting the ritual over with. Afterwards, instead of mentioning the potential danger posed to her by Ron’s escalation, she instead quietly smiles in appreciation; the fragile, transgender (thus pitiable) damsel is saved by the brave ally. It would be disingenuous to make a sweeping statement that not a single transgender person would appreciate it as Rayon does, but instead attention must be drawn to how idealized these circumstances are for a self-congratulatory cisgender allyship. This was not done for Rayon and does nothing for her character, but instead acts simply as a proud medal of progressivism for Ron to wear, and cisgender audiences to feel warmed by. While allyship is suggested to come about not just when a marginalized person draws attention to a circumstance but for others to take initiative of solidarity, it would be far too generous to

consider this an example of that. This tense circumstance concludes successfully due only for the sake of it being written to be so by cisgender writers for sake of constructing a “cisgender/heterosexual hero” narrative.

While it is a rather short scene that could even be removed without impacting the film at all, the film includes a questionable at best scene played for laughs at Rayon’s expense as well as invoking a transphobic concept. After a date with Dr. Saks, Ron is masturbating in his motel room whilst looking at sexual photos of women he has strewn upon his wall (1:17:41-1:17:52). The camera acts as Ron’s point of view, shifting from photo to photo until landing on a photo of Rayon pulling open her shirt to reveal her nipple. He stops masturbating and rips the photo along with two others he finds muttering “I’m gonna kill [her]” (1:17:58). The joke is meant to be a case of “one of these things is not like the other,” where suggestive photos of Rayon is among photos of presumably cisgender women, and Ron was “tricked” into pleasuring himself while looking at these photos. This acts as not only a discreditation of Rayon’s womanhood (not that the film ever gives proper credit to her for this), it also implies a hierarchy in which Rayon is lesser than these presumably cisgender women. Ron would be the punchline of this joke of being “ashamed” of having touched himself while looking at a transgender woman, yet the joke requires degradation of the transgender woman herself. This is inherently connected to the real-world phenomenon of “trans panic defenses,” in which cisgender/heterosexual men (like Ron) violently beat/murder transgender women upon discovering that they are transgender, typically in the context that he was about to have sex with her, but she “tricked” him. Ron was not about to have sex with Rayon in this instance, nor was she even present herself in the scene. However, the film implies Rayon put the suggestive photos of herself there among Ron’s other smutty photographs and that he was not aware of this. Nothing comes about of this scene, nor are the

events referenced again, yet the film still insists a scene where Ron is “tricked” into a sexual context with Rayon and implying a degree of intent from Rayon.

Returning to the scene where Rayon meets with her father, it is as well a shining example of a depiction of a transgender woman you are to pity. In a position where she wants to financially help Ron with maintenance of their Dallas Buyer’s Club, she forgoes make up, slicks, and ties her hair back, and dons a suit to grovel towards her father for money. The suit appears ill-fitted on her which in addition to her body language and dialogue communicates that she is immensely uncomfortable. The concept of a transgender person being forced to wear clothes associated with that of their gender assigned at birth and subsequently demonstrating notable discomfort in those clothes is one understandable at a surface level to a cisgender person, so the movie invokes it. The dialogue, however, provides further depth into pushing her down into a more pitiful condition. The audience does not know Rayon’s father or even what he does but is instead informed he is a man in a privileged socioeconomic class and that any benefits of such are denied to Rayon, leaving her in the lower-class position we see her in throughout the film (the only shelter we see her in with Ron in the motel). She acknowledges this denial to him, to which he replies, “you made that choice yourself” (1:24:24). This choice that he refers to is her living a queer life, giving silent exposition of a prior familial conflict. She responds with “it wasn’t a choice, dad” (1:24:28), thus the movie invokes the “born this way” narrative. Named for the eponymous song by Lady Gaga, “born this way” became a popular slogan of queer activism (particularly among those who seek assimilation into heteronormative society), declaring that one’s queerness is natural, that they were born to be queer and that being queer, as Rayon tells her father, is not a choice. This framing of “not a choice,” however, is a problematic one, because it avoids confrontation with the moral panic around queerness, instead opting for a

proverbial shrug of the shoulders of “sorry, we cannot help it!” Some may understand this as saying, “we are not going anywhere, so get over it” but it still has lingering notes of “but if we could help it, we would” or “I did not get a choice; I was forced by some cosmic will to be this deviant before you.” This framework, when applied to Rayon and her family’s subsequent exclusion of her, turns her tragedy not just on the oppressions of being a transgender woman, but her queerness itself. Rayon’s father exasperatedly says “God help me,” to which she replies that he is, coldly informing him of her having AIDS, thus her soon and inevitable demise (1:24:48-1:24:53). With death now in proximity, the father softens. The promise of her death is the requirement for familial sympathy. A similarity between her father and Ron is that they are both bigots whom we see come to express sympathy towards Rayon, but one based mostly within pity. This extends to the cisgender audience, somewhat, as Rayon’s transness categorizes her as “othered.” The viewer is presumed unable to relate to her, and thus must pity her alongside (arguably former) bigots. The film grants kinder treatment to these bigots, presenting them as folks who can eventually come around, their good graces granted in exchange for voyeurism towards the queer person’s suffering.

As her own character arc reaches its end, the film has Rayon in her second most vulnerable state (only minutes in the film before her death) as she sits nearly naked, reflecting on her diminishing mortality. She is alone in her room, alone except for the viewer to gaze upon her vulnerability and pity her. In a prayer to God over her oncoming demise, she swears she will be pretty when she meets him, “if it’s the last thing [she] does” (1:26:27), offering to the viewer that “being pretty” is all that she is able to hope for now, any other material of spiritual gain inaccessible. This creates another pitiable instance, humbling Rayon down to what a cisgender viewer would be all too tempted to call “bravery” or “perseverance,” where Rayon insists on

prettiness and by implied extension, her womanhood. She holds a pink negligee up to her frail frame, weakened by AIDS, but her face remains almost in tears. Ron is not present for her too be a catalyst for, but she still exists as a transgender woman, othered by not only being such but also by AIDS, in exhibition for the audience.

Rayon's final tragedy comes without a non-queer voyeur, even the viewer excluded from spectating it. Her last lines of dialogue come between sobs and coughs of blood, crying out "I don't want to die" (1:30:35) before the last sight of her being in her hospital bed on only morphine. Her death relegated to occur off screen; the film instead takes priority in the utility her death serves to the cisgender, heterosexual protagonist. Her death acts as the catalyst for Ron to perform another, more violent act of heroism in the heat of passion over his lost companion. He storms into the hospital to grab and shove against the wall the doctor who in the film acted in charge of the AZT trials (a drug the viewer is told is far more harmful than helpful), painfully shouting "you murdered [her]" repeatedly before he is escorted out by security (1:35:18-1:35:51). The viewer is led to feel more grief for Ron than for Rayon, whose death was ultimately just a sacrifice in order to show the viewer how Ron has evolved from the bigot he was in the beginning of the movie, willing to act in violence in the name of one he once disgusted. The violence is meant to be interpreted as a noble act, the only way the now-progressed Ron can grieve being through a blind brutality.

Conclusion

The two films discussed in this paper were each released in the United States within roughly two years of each other, *Dallas Buyers Club* being released in November 2013 and *The Danish Girl* in November 2015. In May 2014, however, an article came out that declared a point that falls between these two films as a point in American civil rights conversation. Katy Steinmetz wrote an article with an interview with Laverne Cox titled “The Transgender Tipping Point” for TIME Magazine. The article follows the actress rising to prominence for her role in *Orange is the New Black*. Steinmetz offers a surface level look into transness, from referring to Christine Jorgensen (a former American soldier who underwent a vaginoplasty, having her own TIME Magazine article in 1952) to recollections of agony of pre-transition life by transgender scholar Susan Stryker, to telling the stories of transgender youth. Steinmetz writes the article with small linguistic nuances that seemed adequate at the time yet quickly became archaic, such as introducing a fifteen-year-old boy named Ashton with reference to his name at birth, a reference more presently considered unnecessary and impolite. Most importantly to note is how the article declares a new “point” that has been passed with its title, upon the basis of prevalence of transgender people gaining a more mainstream awareness in American society, particularly in the realm of activism regarding transgender people (whether it be for their liberty or for insisting sex-based policies at their detriment). When considering this article’s release between the two films, one can certainly notice a difference in portrayals of both Rayon and Lili in their respective movies. Rayon exists as a proxy for Ron’s development, her character having minimal evolution for herself, while Lili evolves as her own character, other characters reacting to her developments. Rayon is frequently referred to with he/him pronouns, whilst Lili is afforded this apparent luxury when she is feminine enough. They both are, however, played by cisgender men

who received Oscar nominations for their roles (Leto winning his nomination), and both characters are sentenced to death by their respective narratives for the audience to pity.

More recently, however, the casting of cisgender actors that were assigned the same sex at birth of a transgender character is a trend in a decline, and with no small part due to public outcry. In 2018, Scarlett Johansson would be cast to play Dante “Tex” Gill in a planned movie titled *Rub & Tug*, Gill being a transgender man. She received backlash for accepting this role, responding to such by directly referencing cisgender men who have been cast to play roles of transgender women (Diller), a reference which undoubtedly shows the trend justifying itself, relying on an excuse of “it has been done before.” Shortly after, however, Johansson would back out of the role (Riotta), even admitting her insensitivity regarding the matter a year later (Sharf). Halle Berry would undergo a similar experience to Johansson, albeit significantly quicker, pulling out of the role to play a transgender man mere days after announcing preparations for it (Moreau). Indeed, transgender people playing transgender roles is on an upswing along with an awareness of the inappropriate nature of cisgender actors playing such roles. The latter is actively expressed when Noelle Stevenson, showrunner for the 2018 Netflix series *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, who responded to fan theories of a character being transgender with immense appreciation but declined to claim him to be transgender as if they intended to make him so, they would have hired a transgender voice actor (meanwhile the show does have a recurring non-binary character played by non-binary actor Jacob Tobias). *Pose*, a television drama based around Black and Latine ballroom culture and queer life, has recently ended, with transgender people on both the cast and crew. And yet, executive producer Janet Mock gave a passionate speech at the premiere of the final season, openly condemning how she received unequal pay for her work, as well as the poor treatment of the transgender community in

Hollywood. Even when the content “about us” is made “with us,” there are still those other than the “us” with enough influence to sully what is made “about us.”

This all proposes a fair question: would having enough of “us” involved fix things, having all those involved be “us?” The first thing to consider is what such “things” would be fixed? Mock’s complaints of underpayment and treatment of transgender people are rather systemic, the former requiring transgender individuals being in such executive power to determine pay, with the latter requiring a cultural overhaul. Instead, consider an ideal circumstance where media is consistently created with transgender representation and with adept consideration of colorism, classism, ableism, et cetera. What would this ideal media grant for transgender people? To steal the title of the Alex Green article in the introduction of this paper: trans visibility will not save us. This is not to say that any vocal criticisms of visibility and representation should be discouraged or muffled, lest this paper be a hypocritical one. However, there is a concern of too much investment within yearning being “good” visibility (or visibility at all), vastly overestimating the height of the plateau of what this visibility can do for transgender people as a class. The plateau exists to agree that there is indeed a height; visibility/representation is not one-hundred percent useless, but usefulness flattens out.

With the phrase “transgender people as a class,” is that suffice enough as a term? At the risk of immediate contraction, the answer is “no.” There are intersections of other facets of a transgender individual’s life that would result in them having more needs or less needs or vastly different needs. It is simple to consider facts such as race or financial standing. In what felt almost like a second “trans tipping point,” in 2020 actor Elliot Page would come out as one of the very few transmasculine actors in Hollywood. This was certainly exciting news, as Page already had an impressive career spanning years, now coming out as a transgender actor with

that career thus credibility. As with all notable celebrity happenings, there was bound to be a notable article to cover this, as a celebrity of Page's fame coming out was a cultural first (hence second "trans tipping point"). Ultimately, the one to interview Page and write the article would be the same journalist who previously interviewed Laverne Cox and declared the "trans tipping point" (again, hence a second one). The transgender community gained representation with an existing celebrity coming out, yet the coverage was granted to an as well established, yet cisgender journalist. This is not declaring a mandate that transgender journalists cover transgender topics (yet highly preferred, as firsthand experience grants nuance a cisgender journalist could likely miss), but rather noting how this new, significant addition of representation did not grant likewise in journalism. More importantly however is the particular focus towards a fact already stated multiple times: Elliot Page is an established celebrity. This was said prior with positivity towards the exciting potential of them playing transgender roles. Now, however, it is reiterated as something to heed, how Page's celebrity status could lead to class prioritization over needs of the greater transgender community. This is not a criticism of Page himself for anything he has done, where he in fact makes insightful and necessary points in his interview with Steinmetz:

Like many trans people, Page emphasizes being trans isn't all about surgery. For some people, it's unnecessary. For others, it's unaffordable. For the wider world, the media's focus on it has sensationalized transgender bodies, inviting invasive and inappropriate questions. But Page describes surgery as something that, for him, has made it possible to finally recognize himself when he looks in the mirror, providing catharsis he's been waiting for since the "total hell" of puberty.

So, not a criticism, but a necessary acknowledgement of how celebrities/upper class individuals tend to prioritize that status over the needs of the community which they share marginality with.

Consider, also, the transgender sex worker. What visibility will work to eradicate whorephobia, or the material conditions that result in a transgender person being forced to stay in sex work, under potentially dangerous circumstances? The transgender sex worker is not an uncommon archetype of a character, yet often relegated to unsympathetic depictions, instead only ones of pity for their inevitable fates (even referenced briefly in *Dallas Buyers Club*, where when the pitiable Rayon gives Ron the money she got from her father, his first question is “D’you sell your ass?” (1:27:31)). Even with a film such as *Tangerine* (2015) which features two transgender sex workers as its main characters, one must ask what this representation could do in real life? This not a criticism of *Tangerine* as if insisting it did such people injustice, but rather a reference of the plateau of representation. *Tangerine* indeed has considerate portrayal of poverty, intentionally depicting the minutia of the main characters relying on public transportation, depicting the time required to wait for a bus to arrive, the time traveled as it goes between the stops. Certainly, this is not going to bring liberation to Black, impoverished, transgender, sex workers like the ones depicted in the film, but it brings a consideration that privileged audiences are used to being able to ignore.

Going into instances where it is not a cisgender person offering a portrayal of a transgender character but rather an advocacy for transgender life, what can be the effects? It is important to note how the neglect performed through these means have race and class in play. Often transgender activism can tunnel vision, some transgender people having the philosophy that the transgender community is the only group of people systemically denied their gender. V Varun Chaudhry reminds us of the fungibility of Black cisgender women with regards to

womanhood and how that can be neglected under discussions of such for white transgender women. With gender (and subsequently womanhood) being constructed and maintained through white and cisgender means, the denial of recognition of womanhood exists for both trans women and Black women who are not trans. Chaudry discusses Natasha, a Black nontrans woman who faces backlash for being hired to run a trans-focused event, choosing to consider Natasha as “nontrans” rather than “cisgender” calls to Savannah Shange’s discussion of “antiblackness and black gender fungibility” (522) as it is applied to trans advocacy, which relies on a “cis/trans binary that...does not and cannot apply to black bodies” (523). This is not to imply here an inherent transness in Black individuals, but an important note of how the status of gendered fungibility is not applied solely on a cisgender level, but a white one. This is due to the standards by which these genders are judged are those created by white, colonizing powers, with eurocentrism in mind. A relatively modern, high-profile example of this is a Black intersex lesbian: South African Olympian Caster Semenya. Semenya was subjected to a “gender verification process,” gender being improperly used synonymously with sex in this instance and made to be examined by “an endocrinologist, a gynecologist and a psychologist” (Kessel). In an article covering the circumstances, Dvora Meyers criticizes former secretary general of the IAAFF Pierre Weiss’s conclusion of Semenya possibly not being one hundred percent woman (again, using language of gender when discussing potential for intersex status). Meyers notes “he based that conclusion strictly on appearance...use[ing] a white northern European lens to determine the femininity of a black woman from the Global South.” Semenya was subject to such scrutiny due to being a Black woman, her gender femininity deemed insufficient and suspicious by white, Eurocentric lenses. This is obviously not an instance of cinema

representation, but a very prominent example of how gender fungibility is not an issue exclusively for transgender people.

Media is a product, funded often by those who prefer an overall maintenance of the status quo. Celebrities, even if they may hold radical politics themselves, can still be at the mercy of a company or agent that utilizes them as a product. However as long as the current capitalism system is standing, media and celebrities will continue to exist as we know them, so there is no reason to not attempt to enjoy them for the time being. That enjoyment is amplified when one can see not only a character that is like them, but the work being done by people like them. This paper has focused on the harms done by pieces of media which attempt mostly to commodify transgender women while neglecting actual transgender women themselves in the production, while those involved still pat themselves on the back for portraying their take on marginalized experiences. This is a grim topic, especially with the films *The Danish Girl* and *Dallas Buyers Club* having their respective transgender women die as part of the plot. But it is uplifting, however, to see what came after them and what can come after. *The Trans Tipping Point* was criticized for insisting on a temporal landmark while transgender people still face the same oppressions, yet a point has indeed been passed. The essential word is “potential,” and it is rising, to a point where a cisgender viewer can watch a transgender experience in media and not feel it an inaccessible other not too far off, with transgender people getting to tell stories of their joy rather than their pain for pity. Media with non-antagonistic focus on transgender life is still a concept in its infancy. Its growing pains are crucial to acknowledge and critique, but that still means it is growing.

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