

Wish You Were Here: Representing Trans Road Narratives in Mainstream Cinema (1970-2016)

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

When Christine Jorgensen stepped off a plane in New York City from Denmark in 1952, she became one of the first instances of trans celebrity, and her intensely popular story was adapted from an article to a memoir and then a film in 1970. Though not the first trans person recorded in history, Jorgensen's story is crucial in the history of trans representation because her journey embodies the archetypal trans narrative which moves through stages of confusion, discovery, cohesion, and homecoming. This structure was solidified in memoirs of the 1950-1970s, and grew in popularity alongside the booming film industry in the wake of the Hays Production Code, which finally allowed directors, producers, and writers to depict trans and gender nonconforming characters and their stories on-screen.

From Jorgensen's adaptation came the often medically focused films of the 1970s, which turned more exploitative and violent as the trans character became a criminal, killer, or monster in films of the 1980s and the early 1990s, and made especially popular through the creation of Buffalo Bill in *The Silence of the Lambs*. For the rest of the 1990s and into the early 2000s, the rise of academic gender theory along with the activism by trans writers and scholars led to more progress in academic sphere, some of which was only minimally represented on-screen in popular films. In this era of film-making, the trans character often became a misunderstood and misrepresented comedy figure and a temporary joke who would soon fade by the end of the film. In the current age of the transgender tipping point, trans characters are more visible than ever before, in both popular media and independently produced films, but as I document in this dissertation, there is still a large gap from the real-life event which may have sparked the story,

and what is represented on the mainstream film screen itself, especially when created by cisgender writers, directors, and producers.

In this dissertation, I argue that the array of trans experiences represented on the popular Hollywood screen derive much of their cultural signification from historical events occurring around the same time period of the film, such as Jorgensen's flight and return, the rise of drag culture in the 1990s, or the trans YouTube community in our current era. I use film adaptation theory and trans history to examine how those producing and consuming the film have read—or misread—its original source. I then trace the meanings that these films have created within the popular culture, and how their circulation has helped—or hindered—trans understanding in a broader social and political world. I also argue that each one of these popular films uses the archetypal trans narrative structure of confusion, discovery, cohesion and homecoming, which then fundamentally links these stories to the American cultural ethos of freedom, transformation, and independence, especially when these narratives involve travel in some way, such as Jorgensen's first flight. This dissertation explores the intersection between the American road narrative and the trans travel narrative as expressed by trans authors and does so as a way to integrate more gender diverse representation into the American cultural canon, as well as document the important role trans, non-binary, and gender nonconforming people have had on American history and popular culture.

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Introduction:
The New American Everyman: Trans Representation and The American Road

Introduction

In 2016, Clyde Peterson released the film *Torrey Pines*. The film uses stop-motion animation in order to tell a story about a cross-country road trip the protagonist takes with his mother the summer he is twelve years old. By the end of the film, this surreal trip turns out to be a kidnapping by his mother during a psychotic break. What was once an imaginative and meditative nearly silent film using stop-motion animation now becomes a seemingly more tragic story.

Torrey Pines is also a trans film, one which uses the tagline "based on a true story" in order to describe the "queer punk coming-of-age story" Peterson experienced with his schizophrenic mother during a summer of the early 1990s. It is a self-realization narrative, as Eva Illouz might label it, since it is a real life narrative that can only be written—or in this case filmed—backwards, after the ending is already known (Illouz 52). It also takes the audience until the end of the film to understand, and then decide on their own interpretation of the events (comedic romp or tragic downfall?), thus mirroring Peterson's own self-realization process through the medium of film. Peterson's queerness is depicted in the film in numerous ways: he fantasizes about Deanna Troi from *Star Trek*; after seeing his mother naked, he imagines growing up into a woman and how horrific that might be for him; and the young Clyde on the screen is depicted visually as a girl, one which trans media scholar Jack Halberstam might say embodies a particular type of "female masculinity" insofar as the myths of masculinity make it "profoundly difficult to pry apart" from physical maleness, and the road narrative is one of the most masculine kind in the American mythos (*Female Masculinity* 1-2).

Torrey Pines is a road film, in particular a cross-country adventure, which is a genre that has captured Americans since the *The Tempest*. As Leo Marx claims in *The Machine in the Garden*, the first story of America can be considered William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, since it contains a travel story where "an unspoiled landscape [is] suddenly invaded by advance parties of a dynamic, literate, and purposeful" people, much like America's nascent history (34-36). For some, *The Tempest* functioned as an escape plan; a spiritual quest; a story based in mobility, and thus it defined centuries of American stories by American authors in their new homeland. With *Torrey Pines*, Clyde Peterson has become the everyman of the quintessential American road story. In 2016 when this film was released, this everyman is a trans man, and much like the everymen (or everywomen) before him, he uses the expansive landscape of the United States to explore who exactly that person was, has been, and is becoming.

A Review of The American Road

The American road and this new trans everyman is what this dissertation is about, especially the road as a "backdrop [for] a journey of escape, self-discovery, awakening, transcendence, and, occasionally, romantic love" and especially so in on-screen and adapted versions of the road tale (Marchetti 198). Before there was *Torrey Pines*, however, and in the years after *The Tempest*, there were other everymen behind the wheel or on the road, and I'd like to give a brief overview of road literature and its legacy in American fiction.

Many early road narratives after *The Tempest* are about responsibility and legacy; they are stories that reconfigure or right the past in order to then have a future, but it is a past that can never be neutral, since America's legacy of freedom is still built on the past of slavery (as Toni Morrison discusses in more depth in her work *Playing In The Dark* about the American literary

imagination [20-7]). These early road stories, especially when reviewed in hindsight and with this complicated history in mind, now seem to complicate the idea of freedom as much as they embrace its value: Mary Rowlandson uses a woman's captivity to invigorate her spiritual progress, but does so at the cost of misrepresenting indigenous people as savages; Harriet Beecher Stowe writes *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, one of the most popular novels of its day, as a way to campaign against slavery, yet depicts certain characters so poorly that the lasting image of her work is the racial caricature of Uncle Tom (Tompkins 122-145); and Margaret Mitchell examines similar themes of race and freedom in 1936 with *Gone With The Wind* in the character of Scarlett O'Hara, and does so against a well-researched backdrop of the Civil War, but writes over 1,000 pages without giving any insight into former slaves on her Tara plantation. In the 20th century, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* popularizes the car as a way to obtain both social and literal mobility, only to then use it as a deadly weapon halfway through while John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* uses the cross-country travels of its characters as a microcosm to examine the economic struggles of the depression and The American Dream. As the counterculture of the 1950s and 1960s emerged, the everymen at the heart of these American road stories changed, thanks in part to the GI bill, the ease of access of the automobile, and other programs that promoted social—and then physical—mobility (Slethaug "Mapping" 35-36). In Jack Kerouac's genre-defining work called *On The Road*, the working-class main characters Dean and Sal embark on their adventure without an exact destination; their road trip is merely a chance to "hear a new call and see a new horizon" (Kerouac 15). Following their adventure were many other road narratives hooked on the counterculture's rebellion, such as Tom Wolfe's *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, and Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*. John Updike's *Run, Rabbit* also took his main

character Harry Angstrom to the road, and imbued the character's kinetic energy with urgency and importance that would later earn Updike two Pulitzers for the series. As decades passed from each instalment of Angstrom's adventures, however, the American cultural landscape was changing yet again. By the series' third title in 1981, road culture was undergoing a conservative era marked by suppression and restriction: Ronald Regan was elected; gas prices rose; the highway system became associated with work rather than freedom; and crimes committed on the road became a real and persistent threat (Slethaug "Mapping" 35-6). As the mainstream and counterculture left the road, those at the margins took to the highway—only to demonstrate that they had been there all along. In 1986, for instance, Sarah Schulman's lesbian rewrite of *On The Road* called *Girls, Visions, and Everything* made the road journey female and queer, and in doing so, linked it to another lesbian travel narrative that ended in America, that of Djuna Barnes's 1936 *Nightwood*. Barnes' text, along with John Rechy's *City of Night* and Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* illuminated the city as a queer mecca while also highlighting that queer people have inhabited the American road all along. LGBTQ people always have been on the road, putting their "queer shoulder[s] to the wheel" as Allen Ginsberg has observed in his poem "America," a work which is deeply indebted to the poetry of Walt Whitman, another queer man who was deeply involved with the Romantic notion of the road itself (Slethaug "Mapping" 34-37).

Historically, American literature as a whole seems to be wedded to various repeating images of the road which then communicate the country's larger values and ideas of home, freedom, constriction, community, the self, and history for each new decade and audience. The US's history is difficult, complicated, and filled with ideological power structures which continually play themselves out in the stories told about the US, in the US, or in other narratives

using the US as its landscape; these stories then inform the imaginations of its citizens and those who partake in this fiction and meaning-making process. The road as a metaphor, trope, and repeated symbol within American literature has been a way to embrace a present-tense sense of adventure and freedom without a past *along with* a narrative that often kept others enslaved, oppressed, or outright ignored. Yet the road has always been a transformative place for outsiders like the “transvestites, transsexuals, drag queens and kings, cross-dressers, bull-daggers, stone butches, adrongynes, diesel dykes or berdache” which make up trans author Leslie Feinberg’s notion of the “gender outlaw” (Feinberg *Liberation* 206). The road is, and seems as if it always will be, quintessentially American, but Feinberg, among other authors, also assert that the road is quintessentially—or perhaps archetypally—trans as well.

In Jay Prosser’s work, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, he defines the archetypally trans story, drawing from his analysis on numerous trans memoirs, and summarizes the narrative structure as such:

[1] suffering and confusion; [2] the epiphany of self-discovery; [3] corporeal and social transformation/conversion; [4] and finally the arrival 'home' —the reassignment. (101).

To fulfill these stages, numerous trans memoirs have also become travelogues. Sometimes this travel is configured as a "mythic" journey (Prosser 116) or a "vacation, or an overseas trip" (Aizura "Persistence" 142); sometimes these journeys go one-way while other times they loop back to home after traveling to a foreign country, or loop back around yet again, never settling. The trans travel narrative facilitates a multi-purpose sense of homecoming (into a body, into a community, a family, and so on), and it also emerges as a narrative structure due to practical reasons and limitations in order to find medical care. As Lucas Crawford and Aren Aizura have

pointed out in their work, gender transition itself is often marked by travel in order to seek out the best practitioners, many of whom are located in different areas and especially bigger cities (Crawford "Mobilizing" 127-143; *Mobile Subjects* by Aren Aizura documents these travel narratives in more depth as well). While the trans writers of the 1950s, 60s and 70s often travelled to foreign countries to find these practitioners, travelling from the small town to the big city became especially common in the 1990s and well into 2000s, as Jonathan Ames documents in his edited collection of trans memoirs and autobiographies called *Sexual Metamorphosis*. Some trans authors have depicted road trips in their fiction and nonfiction alike, such as Leslie Feinberg's novel *Stone Butch Blues* where Jess migrates to the city and also searches for hir¹ lost butch role model Al, and Kate Bornstein's travels across the US in her small VW Bug as depicted in her memoir *Gender Outlaw: Men, Women, and The Rest of Us*.

If the American road is where those seeking freedom and homecoming tend to go, then of course there have been trans people taking this journey all along. *Torrey Pines* then stands out to me as one of the most recent expressions of the American urge to find "freedom, knowledge, and transformation" (Ford and Slethaug 4) on the road *in addition to* an interesting adaptation of the archetypal travel narrative that numerous trans scholars have identified in their work. The American narratives which have defined the country, along with the searching and yearning for a home in the body and in the larger world in which trans narratives express succinctly, meet in *Torrey Pines*, and become visually expressed through the filmic image of the road itself via stop-motion animation. The American road and the trans road merge in *Torrey Pines*, but these patterns and motifs have been there for a long time.

¹ I use the gender neutral pronouns hir and zie to refer to Leslie Feinberg and the character Jess throughout the course of this dissertation, as that is how Feinberg is said to have identified on hir website. Zie has also said that: "I care which pronoun is used, but people have been respectful to me with the wrong pronoun and disrespectful with the right one. It matters whether someone is using the pronoun as a bigot, or if they are trying to demonstrate respect."

Though there have been numerous collections exploring the American road, film, and other literary outputs associated with it (*Hit The Road, Jack* edited by Gordon Slethaug being one of many), and there has been much work now devoted to exploring the connections between "sex change and migration" (Schewe 2-3) and the trans travel narrative (such as Trystan Cotten's *Transgender Migrations* and *Mobile Subjects* by Aren Aizura), I aim to more explicitly link these discourse communities together (the American road and the queer/trans road), because these communities are not separate at all. The trans narrative has often been seen (particularly by those outside the community and in academia) as a special case study (Serano *Whipping* 134), rather than a fundamental part of American literature and expressing a fundamental part of American road culture. The everyman behind the wheel shapes and changes, it seems, with each new road narrative produced in the US, but I wish to emphasize as an ally within American Studies that the trans travel narrative has always been here, in some form or another, and that this discussion and treatment of its narrative structure is still on-going. I use my position within the academy to highlight and emphasize the already well-established narratives by trans people dealing with the "persistent" trope of travel (Aizura "Persistence" 139), and by doing so within an American Studies and Popular Film context, I link explicitly these themes in order to better integrate the work done by trans scholars, authors, and writers into the historical and popular canon. I also focus my work on the filmic adaptation and interpretation of these road narratives, since adaptation scholarship is expressly devoted to tracing the lineage of images which informs its production. In my dissertation, then, I aim to take a popular iteration of the American road narrative which also attempts to represent trans life/characters, and trace it back to its original source, and by doing so, allow for a firmer connection to the work of trans and gender nonconforming people within the popular archive.

Researcher Position and Limitations

Before I go onto discuss my approach to adaptation theory and outline my chapters, I must add in my own stance—and stake—in this work. Much like the American landscape can never truly be the “virgin land” that Henry Nash recounts (especially not with the US’s imperialist and racist histories), I cannot be a blank slate of a researcher. I inhabit a dominant subject position in trans representation: a cisgender viewer. I cannot claim to know or fully represent trans people’s lives, experiences, and emotions. That is not the goal of this dissertation. Rather, what I aim to do, and what I hope to do with this dissertation, is trace the lineage of certain themes, motifs, and images of the American road *and* the archetypal trans travel narrative in film and draw firmer connections between these communities inside the academy and film studies explicitly. I situate my research within American studies, popular culture studies, and film studies; that being said, I have drawn on extensive research from other fields (such as sociology, psychology, and of course, trans studies) in order to better understand these representations on the screen, where these images may have begun, how these images and stories have been misread, and where these writers/directors/producers could have possibly gone astray.

I came to this research for personal reasons. As a teenager, I was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa and spent a summer in an institution. This experience of confinement made me particularly drawn to the American road narrative precisely because it valorized “freedom, knowledge, and transformation” (Ford and Slethaug 4) and, due to my past experience, I held these ideals in high regard. In my twenties, when I started graduate school, I moved in with a trans woman and became associated with a larger LGBTQ community. It is through that

community where I began to read (and watch) trans stories, and where I first began to see connections with the American road narratives I had also concerned myself with in university.

I soon began to see that the eating disorder narrative and the trans narrative have similar structural shapes. They are both "body narratives" (to borrow a term from Jay Prosser) insofar as the conclusion to both (as represented in memoir, fiction, and cinema) tends to be a homecoming in the body (Prosser 101). In Marya Hornbacher's 2014 afterword to her phenomenally successful eating disorder memoir *Wasted*, she writes that she could no longer "erase myself. I did not want to escape. I wanted to come home" ("Afterword"). She continues by stating that twenty years later, post-publication of her memoir, she has finally

come home. [...] this body is home. This is where I live and hang my hat. This is where I settle into my hips and sit easy in myself, slung together with strong muscles and bones, made gentle and forgiving with flesh. This body is durable, has lasted for years, hunkered down through fierce storms and allowed for the peaceful erosions of age. It is like a cottage on the shore: weathered and well made, a place where a person could comfortably live.

I like it here. It is my own. ("Afterword").

In both trans and eating disorder body narratives, there are similar scenes and motifs of the doctors' room, the hospital visit, even institutionalization as a whole. Both narratives struggle with the way in which the body is read by others and how it is read by the self (often characterized through the similar terms body dysmorphia and gender dysphoria). Some of these narratives even directly overlap, as Rae Spoon, Kyle Lukoff, and Elliott DeLine have all written about their struggles with food and eating as trans and non-binary people.

Eating disorder narratives and trans narratives can also be travel narratives, too. Sometimes there is literal travel in the pages of an eating disorder memoir, such as the anorexic Michael Krasnow running away from home and jumping from bus to bus, motel room to motel room, so he could starve himself. Sometimes the travel is more frantic, kinetic, and claustrophobic, such as the constant exercise in hotel rooms that Hornbacher describes in *Wasted*, or her late night endless walks, or her twenty-five mile daily runs (163-4; 178; please note that pages are for the 2004 edition). Literary scholar Leslie Heywood uses motion and movement to describe her sense of 'literary anorexia' which is a theory she honed as she struggled with her own anorexia and recovery. In her book's introduction, she writes that much of her work seemed to be characterized by

[r]eading and running, running and reading. Every so often I would pause in my reading, struck by a similarity between longings expressed in these [modernist] texts and my obsession with food and flesh, my urgent denial of the feminine, and my desire to "get rid of my body." My aesthetics and my longing to transcend this vulnerable body that I was stuck with and that wasn't mine were circulating through those texts, and I read this similarity as an affirmation of my "superior" world, which was, after all, like that described in these "great books." (6).

Heywood uses her idea of 'literary anorexia' to examine and reinterpret certain novels, especially from the modernist period, as a way to locate herself within a broader canon. Her concepts and connections to the travel narrative and the body narrative have been expanded outwards to encapsulate American fiction as well. In addition to Heywood, Lisa Sewell has identified themes of 'literary anorexia' in the American poet Louise Gluck, while Branka Arsić focuses her anorexic interpretation to *Bartleby the Scribner* from the famous Herman Melville short story

(33-53). Much of this work of re-imagining characters and using certain patterns to illuminate a new interpretation reminds me of Lucas Crawford's act of 'transing' (*Transgender* 14-17), a technique that is similar to the act of queering a text or character. Crawford borrows this term from the work of Paisley Currah, Lisa Jean Moore, and Susan Stryker and expands it in order to raise particular textual questions along the lines of gender and identity, orientation and phenomenology, and in doing so, Crawford attempts to situate new readings of gendered bodies "between the macro- and micro-political registers through which the lives of bodies become enmeshed in the lives of nations, states, and capital-formations" (*Transgender* 14). Transing as a textual practice then becomes a matter of how bodies (both character bodies but also bodies of literary work) can move through space and time; change their shape and meaning; and especially for the modernist period (in which Crawford devotes much of his work), how these bodies are decorated or ornamented (*Transgender* 14-17). I view transing as a way to shift the reading of trans texts outwards, rather than inwards; it relies on the exteriority of the representation, rather than an eternal and unilateral sole interpretation (Crawford *Transgender* 14-17). The reader in this textual practice, along with Heyward's literary anorexia, now has the power to see similarities within the structures of storytelling, and in doing so, make one of numerous interpretations on these characters, motifs, and situations.

It is the shape of this particular body narrative, that of trans people as they are adapted to the cinema screen inside travel or road narratives, which interests me for this dissertation. In this act of adaptation, the body becomes interpreted through numerous binaries: lost/found, body/mind, emotion/logic, cis/trans, male/female, and of course, home/away. These binaries illuminate power structures, but also emerge as potential tools to re-inscribe meaning. Please note, however, that I am not saying that these two narratives—that of trans people and those with

eating disorders—are the same. I am also not saying that simply because I have experienced an eating disorder narrative on the personal level that I understand the trans experience (fictional or otherwise) inherently. I cannot know someone else's experience, only my own. I am merely a scholar pointing to patterns of representation, and I hope that by doing so, I can highlight a particular reading that is one of many out there. I have gone with this particular body narrative, rather than exploring the ramifications of eating disorder narratives on-screen, mostly due to potential choices in films. While eating disorder films and representation seemed to dwindle in the decade after my own experience, films with trans protagonists and representation only seemed to grow.

I am, of course, an outsider in this particular group. Since representation is always a re-presentation of the facets of everyday life, and so often this representation is from a dominant subject position, I see my work as echoing Edward Said's on the inherent duality of representation (9-15; 28-30). The sheer fact of attempting to represent the Other means that I illuminate far more about the dominant subject position that I—and most of these writers/directors/producers—inhabit. Said studies the concept of Orientalism not because he wishes to access some eternal truth about people from the so-called "Orient"; he studies Orientalism because he wishes to examine Occidental culture, perceptions, and biases. I wish to do the same with trans representation in this dissertation, since I believe that studying popular cultural notions of trans experience illuminates far more about cisgender ideologies, assumptions, and biases. This is especially so with the first two chapters, where I examine the first popular cultural notions of trans experience on the cinema screen and how it has been shaped and changed through a cisgender idealized body and notions of success/failure. If, as adaptation scholar Rachel Carroll states, the act of adapting a text is marked with a particular

“desire to return to an ‘original’ textual encounter” and then each subsequent adaptation is “perhaps symptomatic of a culture[‘s] compulsion to repeat” (*Adaptation 1*), then repeated images and tropes—such as the “big reveal” (Connelly 97) scenes in trans cinema—happen because they are symptomatic of something larger. Dismissing a text then because it is not accurate or positive, or because it retains fidelity to some original source, is not my main goal since these texts still communicate something that should be analyzed.

The last two chapters of this dissertation are my attempts to posit an alternative viewing experience for some of these dominant images and genre conventions circulated by the popular culture in relation to trans people; I do this not to point at some eternal truth, but to re-emphasize the power the possible viewer has in representation and film studies. I engage in this work by using adaptation studies once again, especially Patricia White’s concept of retrospectatorship since I believe her theory highlights the genre of film’s inherent problematics, along with its potentialities. In her work *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability*, White uses her concept of “retrospectatorship” as a way to view—and then review—older films from an era that would not (and could not) depict lesbian identity on the screen and redeem these images in some way (95-110). Retrospectatorship is an act of looking backwards towards the past but with the cogent knowledge of representability now; in effect, the way White reviews Classical Hollywood cinema for its particular “cinematic codes” (97) which define an unspoken lesbian narrative is how I view much of my work when I look back on older films (especially those from the 1970s-2000s) where writers/directors/producers may have not have had access to exact language and/or discursive possibilities in which to express their intention of representing a trans character, but that still might provide some insight, recognition, embodiment, or meaning-making for a potential viewer of the film. In this type of analysis, the

audience's role is paramount, since they are the active ones looking back with new knowledge, but I am also highly aware that not all audience members will agree with what I see. Rachel Carroll has characterized White's concept of retrospectatorship as a "subjective fantasy [that] revises memory traces" of a previous experience, allowing for "[c]ultural texts 'outside' the subject [to] participate in th[e] structuring [of the film]" in order to derive new meaning (Carroll *Adaptation* 43-44; White 196-197). This act of reviewing cannot be done without taking who the viewer is into consideration. As such, my own sense of retrospectatorship is then informed by historical documents and trans voices from the era the film was made as well as recent testimonies from trans scholars that I have researched, in addition to whatever limitations I bring to the screen as a white, able-bodied, non-trans viewer. I attempt to be as transparent as I can in my cultural readings and analysis, but I am limited.

In this manner, I see my work in this dissertation on representation as sharing similarities with recent books written about representation from outsider's positions, such as Stuart Murray's *Representing Autism* and Rachel Carroll's *Transgender Literary Imagination*. Both works come from an English Literature and Film background; both works are also keenly aware of fiction's ability to blur the boundaries between the self and Other. That being said, both writers are not unconscious to the ramifications of these representations, nor their place inside of a broader power structure. Murray considers his position within Disability Studies through a critical examination in his preface about his struggle at finding a book cover for his work. He writes about a photograph he wants to use of two autistic children in front of a building, where both girls are on playground equipment. This is seemingly just a photo, but the scene itself is front of an institution, one of the first for autistic children, and as such it is a place that remains filled with systemic oppression for autistic people and those on the spectrum (xiv-xvi).

Murray acknowledges succinctly that this picture can't ever be just a picture. Representation as a whole can never just be a representation, but that is precisely why it must be written, spoken, and talked about from as many perspectives as possible. The series of questions that the photograph evokes for Murray are why he is writing in the first place. Such an image “calls for the revision of processes by which we read and judge the autistic subject. It requires us to look twice at Bown's photograph” (xvi). Murray's book is his act of looking twice, and I see my work in a similar way. I must look twice, three times, maybe more—because the image is never just an image, and there is always so much more to say. Murray is aware of this history, though he has not experienced it personally. Similarly, Rachel Carroll writes about the transgender literary imagination and spends much of her introduction reviewing similar questions of agency, subjectivity, and trans history (*Transgender Literary* 1-30). Mikel J. Koven, another film studies scholar who has deeply influenced my work, also illuminates his own subject position of whiteness and the problematic structure of filmmaking as he analyzes and completes a compendium of Blaxploitation cinema (7-9).

The films, books, and other artefacts that I have drawn upon in this dissertation have real cultural baggage, knowledge, and in most cases, have already been (or are in the process of being) analyzed by historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and trans studies scholars. As I have watched these films, read these memoirs, and read the critical and insightful history recorded by cis and trans people alike, I notice gaps in articulation, representation, and adaptation. I aim document to document these gaps in this dissertation, like Koven, Carroll, and Murray have documented in their own works, but of course, my research must be looked at twice.

Further Limitations on Film

I am also limited in the types and certain texts I examine. I have mentioned several times that I am more devoted to analyzing popular films, rather than independently made films such as *Torrey Pines*. While I do and will mention smaller budget or not as well-known films (such as *By Hook or By Crook*), the bulk of my work examines films with trans characters in them and/or films with characters in them whom people assume to be trans, or can be read through a more broader and inclusive understanding of trans (or trans* as Jack Halberstam stylizes [*Trans** 21-24]). I have made these choices for several reasons.

Since trans identity is often misunderstood within popular culture, and sometimes still treated as a metaphor or for poetic value rather than a lived reality for numerous people, I think it is important to get right to the source of the misinformation and misrepresentation. So often, that means films by cis writers/directors/producers. Moreover, since trans identity itself is often co-created with doctors and therapists inside institutional walls, and sometimes these institutions fail, it is important yet again to acknowledge the cisgender role within these fundamental misunderstandings and misrepresentations. I examine film because it represents the cisgender gaze and assumptions the most, but I also see film as one of the best ways to examine (and re-examine) the roles that trans, non-binary, and gender nonconforming people have been playing in popular culture and the American road all along. This is one of the main reasons why I use adaptation studies within a more broader framework of Media Studies and American Studies, since these discipline allow me to put the onus on the audience—or me as a researcher—to reread and review what has come before, and then to highlight and emphasize the voices who have already always been there. I also aim to analyze and trace the lineage of certain harmful images or representations as a way of understanding, and perhaps rewriting, some problematic

discursive approaches. While trans voices are not absent in this dissertation, they are mostly in the form of critical scholarship, real life case studies, or life narratives which act as source texts and road literature written by trans people. For instance, I draw on Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* for both its resonance within the trans community and trans narrative structure, but also because it can be read as a road narrative. Similarly, I use the creative output of trans woman Laura Jane Grace, including her 2015 memoir and some of her song covers since she represents a slice of the American road narrative and the archetypal trans one as well.

The genre of the road narrative is another way that I limit the scope of my dissertation. Since the road is a common and repeated trope in both transgender and American texts, I examine the interlocking points where the road narrative (or broadly speaking, the older travel narrative) comes into contact with trans experience and culture, though that trans culture and identity is often understood through the lens of cisgender popular culture. I then use certain films as unique access points in order to understand how certain ideas about trans identity have been created and replicated, and then also examine the cultural and historical material associated with its creation to trace a genealogy while also making an interpretative argument. In short, I use films to examine ideas about trans people that the cisgender culture holds, and then examine that next to the writing of trans voices, in order to integrate a better understanding of the trans travel narrative from a trans perspective, and also to potentially illuminate another possible reading within the film's overall message. I am reading, rereading, and participating in a form of retrospectorship and highlighting the freeplay adaptations of others. My job is the analysis of representation, not the historical events it might claim to represent, though I do acknowledge the historical circumstances that might inspire such films and I do my best to keep trans voices, scholarship, and material realities close in the foreground, even if I may disagree with certain

readings of some previously made films. This is not me saying that other trans scholars in this exact area (such as Joelle Ruby Ryan or Julia Serano) are wrong; it is merely me saying that, perhaps, from another angle, another reading, the movie could be viewed differently.

I selected films that expressed some form of “archetypal” (Prosser 101) trans travel narrative in order to examine, analyze, and determine what the road as a trope, symbol, or metaphor means for the authors and audiences who also engage with the film and its possible source texts. Though arguments can be made for trans people (and therefore texts about or by trans people) having existed for centuries, I limit my examination to the beginning of popular screen culture and the technologies that help to facilitate and proliferate mass culture. My dissertation then starts with stories about or directly inspired by Christine Jorgensen, since she was the first trans celebrity (Kelly). She was not the first trans person to ever be documented or recorded, but she appears as the first representation in this dissertation because she was the first trans representation commonly known and popularized through mass media forms like television, newspapers, film, and pulp novels among others (Kelly). Also, since her narrative uses the “persistent” travel trope (Aizura "Persistent" 139-142), she also meets my other objective, which is to ultimately highlight that the American road narrative and the trans travel narrative share similar origins; that trans people have been on the road just as long, and are therefore an important part of American road culture and mythos overall.

These are the reasons why I examine a B-movie flop like *The Christine Jorgensen Story*, since the real life story behind it is critically important and would go on to form and consolidate many of the filmmaking techniques in the following decades. I also examine the films that most media scholars in LGBTQ studies considers trans in some regard, such as *Boys Don't Cry* and *The Silence of the Lambs*, but I also complicate the reception of their main trans characters as

good/bad, focusing on the potential of these figures instead. Similarly, I try to reread and reinterpret the drag queen films of the 1990s which many LGBTQ media scholars have criticized (see Straayer and Ryan); I do this because these films often utilize the trope of the road, and I think there is a potential trans* reading in their story structures, something of which I attempt to facilitate using Jack Halberstam's terminology (*Trans** 115-6). Finally, I leave off this dissertation with the more recent turn towards the genre of the trans romantic comedy. The films I examine in that last chapter—2014's *Boy Meets Girl* and 1999's *Better Than Chocolate*—are not as well known outside LGBTQ film studies, but since the rom-com genre is one of the most popular (Doherty), and it also utilizes images of travel, the road, and homecoming, they fit in within my overall goal of examining how trans representation and the American road exist together, and form a key aspect of American culture.

Each chapter will go through each era of filmmaking as chronologically as I can while also following a trope's main message and overall meaning of a specific film studied. For instance, the chapter on trans romance and the road uses films from the late 1990s and one from early 2010s, while my two middle chapters examine films from the 1990s and one (*Transamerica*) from the early 2000s, and these two chapters are sub-divided by the specific tropes they examine (trans criminality and the road; the road trip film and broken down cars). I have gone with this order for the ease of reading, favouring history and themes as an organizing principle, to demarcate each chapter and its cogent thesis statement.

A Note on Trans vs. Transgender vs. Transsexual vs. Trans*

In 2014, Time Magazine declared a "transgender tipping point" and by virtue of doing so, solidified much of the language around transgender representation (Steinmetz). People outside

the trans community began to use the term “transgender,” often shortened it to “trans,” and most media outlets continue to use this version today (“Glossary of Terms – Transgender”). I use the shortened “trans” the most in this dissertation, especially when speaking generally, since I think 'trans' reflects the intention of what I'd like to do the best: describe something and describe someone. I view *trans* as adjective which describes a specific identity and experience. I like Susan Stryker's definition the most, since she couples her definition with an experience of mobility. In *Transgender History*, she writes that the trans person is someone who

move[s] away from the gender they were assigned at birth, [and those] who cross over (trans-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender. Some people move away from their birth-assigned gender because they feel strongly that they properly belong to another gender in which it would be better for them to live; others want to strike out toward some new location, some space not yet clearly defined or concretely occupied; still others simply feel the need to get away from the conventional expectations bound up with gender that was [...] initially put upon them. In any case, it is the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place—rather than any particular destination or mode of transition—that best characterizes the concept of “transgender.” (Stryker, *Transgender History*, 9).

In this sense, trans is an adjective which describes someone who *moves*; they travel, they cross “a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place” (9); when I refer to cisgender people, I am using it as an adjective which describes someone who, in this case, does not move from an unchosen starting place. I see trans as an adjective; when I write trans man or trans woman in this dissertation, I am describing the type of femininity or masculinity they inhabit,

one that characterizes them as moving from an unchosen starting place and into their chosen place/body. Like Stryker, I also make no claims on knowing (or needing to know) the particular “destination or mode of transition” (9). There are as many different trans people as there are destinations from the “unchosen starting place” (9) and it is not my job as a media scholar to say which is better or worse, right or wrong. It is only my job to interpret texts in various ways, and give credence to possible other readings while I’m at it, and still be sensitive to those who it claims to represent.

For that main reason, I also use trans as an adjective which describes a film, book, or media production which also embodies characters who move in this manner, and/or texts which also take on this similar movement structure in their very construction and theme. These characters may not have said the words on-screen “I am transgender”—and the authors of the work itself may not have either—but the representation on screen has demonstrated a ‘moving away’ from a gender at some point during the film or book or movie itself. Sometimes my labelling a film a ‘trans’ film involves a “transing” (*Transgender* Crawford 14) of the text itself, or viewing it through White’s concept of retrospectatorship; with other films, I might refer to the ‘transsexual plotline’ that I see in Prosser’s work, or the trans* plotline of Halberstam’s work, because I see these structures representing what the characters on-screen seem to most resemble. In no way am I making a claim that one narrative structure is better than the other, or that one ending place is the desired ending location for all trans representation, or all trans people. The difficulty with studies of narratives is that they, however, must end while people who watch them and the people who are represented in that identity group continue to grow, shape, and change—as they should, as they must, as they will continue to do. My use of the word trans functions, overall, as the best way to include as many people as I can when speaking generally,

but since I also aim to represent the diversity of experiences within the trans community which can be—and have been—represented on the screen, I use other terms and words and refer to these experiences, often through the lens of trans scholars.

That being said, to pretend that my choices of trans or trans* or transsexual or transgender then is a mere matter of exteriority is also to miss the point. Language like this is never neutral, so I have done my best to address its nuances and meanings in each context and especially so in this introduction. Providing a glossary is also of very little help, since glossaries tend to be proscriptivist rather than express the nuances of language between people, between communities, and inside the community itself. Moreover, I am very aware that as soon as I stop writing this explanation, the language may change. I ask for forgiveness if the language I'm using is already out of date, or if I have become too general with my use of trans. I use it because it is general, allowing for inclusion rather than exclusion, and it was what I often saw used in trans communities I have involved with peripherally. It is what I know, and it is what I use here.

Wish You Were (Historically) Here

I have called this dissertation *Wish You Were Here* for several reasons. The first being the postcard, which often contains the words *Wish You Were Here*, and its obvious relation to the road narrative. A cry of *Wish You Were Here* also seems to ring out in so many trans memoirs, perfectly encapsulating the feeling of gender dysphoria into a sentiment that anyone can understand since it recognizes Stryker's definition of trans as moving away from an "unchosen starting place" (9) while sometimes not knowing at all where the future ending will be. As a claim *Wish You Were Here* can sometimes slip into nostalgia, especially the imperialist kind which bell hooks and Renato Rosaldo describe as "nostalgia, often found under imperialism,

where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed” and which these scholars criticize since this nostalgia is a “process of yearning for what one has destroyed that is a form of mystification” (Rosaldo qtd in hooks 25). The sentiments expressed in this dissertation, or even in the cry of *Wish You Were Here*, need not always slip into this damaging register. Instead, I see *Wish You Were Here* as a claim to a future where the horizon is better than now since “queerness is not yet here” (Muñoz 1), and since it is that imagined future where trans life can be integrated into history and better represented overall.

My dissertation title, then, is an attempt to capture this feeling of something being missing, yet knowing that it might soon be there that I have seen on the screen in so many different iterations. *Wish You Were Here* is a cry to the mismatch of what I know to be true—trans people are here, they have existed for a long time—and what I see missing in the American and popular film canon which has been presented to me in my undergrad and some parts of my graduate studies. Rather than dwelling too long in this perceived missing piece, I engage with numerous films, books, and media objects (like photographs or medical documents) assuming the trans person is already there. Rather than wishing, I aim to take these texts and find ways in which trans people can exist in the edges, on the road, and travelling along side others all along.

Another brief note on history: to attempt to summarize all of trans history in this introduction would be foolish. In Jack Halberstam's latest book, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Guide to Gender Variance*, he requires an entire chapter to summarize the debates between cis and trans feminists alone; Patricia Eliot's book *Debates In Transgender, Queer, and Feminist Theory* spends over 200 pages recounting these histories in more depth; and Susan Stryker has already compiled the exceptionally informative and straight-forward *Transgender History*, along with *The Transgender Studies Reader* (edited with Stephen Whittle) in order to give a baseline of

what has gone on before now, while trans scholar Aren Aizura has taken up the head editor position for *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* with Stryker years later. While writing this dissertation over the past six years, more and more books have come out which picked up particular threads that had not yet been developed when I first started. I am relieved to have such a wealth of information, as much as I am frustrated by the need for constant revision, reassessment, and an inability to record history at all, precisely because this history is not even history anymore, but present-tense debates, issues, and communities existing in real time. When necessary to know specific trans historical conditions and certain “contested sites” (Elliot 1), however, I have provided as much detail as I can.

Chapter Overview

Chapter One entitled "Based on a True Gender Journey: Adapting The Trans Story from Travel Text to Cinema Screen" examines the “based on a true story” tagline which appears on numerous films with trans people as protagonists, especially the first well-known story of Christine Jorgensen. The desire to return to an original source text with these films means that directors often turned towards the memoirs trans people produce, but as I argue, the adaptation process from memoir to screen often empties out the emotional content (and trans perspective) from these texts and sublimates the feelings of gender dysphoria into the visual display of the trans body. These reveal shots, cisgender casting choices, and a doctor's gaze as the filmic gaze then become solidified cinematic codes which are then repeated in numerous other films of the 1970s, all which take on a more exploitative and B-movie tone. I end the chapter with an analysis of the 2015 film *The Danish Girl* in order to demonstrate how many of these 1970s

cinematic codes appear and make the film appear regressive and stilted, especially given the changing landscape of trans representation today.

Chapter Two entitled "Gender on the Run: Criminality, Materiality, and Retrospectatorship" analyzes the trope of the trans criminal/monster which emerges in film post-Hays Production Code and becomes solidified in the 1990s with the films *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Boys Don't Cry*. While these two films seem extremely different on the surface, it is my argument that it is precisely each trans character's surface in these stories (Jame Gumb in *The Silence of the Lambs* and Brandon Teena in *Boys Don't Cry*) which give the audience access to a trans reading of their gender presentations. In doing so, the audience (and myself in the chapter's argument) performs an act of retrospectatorship in order to redeem the monster/criminal archetype. In reclaiming the monster, I argue that it is possible to reclaim the space on the screen for the trans filmic body to be both read as trans and redeemed through an image of the gender outlaw who uses their criminality and/or their rage to articulate their embodiment.

Chapter Three is called "From Temporary Transvestite to *Transamerica*: The Road Film and 1990s to Early 2000s Trans Representation" and examines the postmodern pastiche of the 1990s road film through the numerous drag queen movies made in this era. Instead of viewing each of these depictions as a facet of the temporary transvestite trope, I argue through another form of retrospectatorship and freeplay adaptation that the gender nonconforming characters in these film slow time down, and by doing so, represent an extended third stage of the archetypal trans journey on the screen. I also contrast these road films with the much later depiction of a cross-country trip in *Transamerica*, where the road narrative is now used to fully express the feelings of gender dysphoria and therefore validate the trans woman's travels to find her son *and* her bodily homecoming on-screen.

The last chapter entitled "Trans Sex/Gender and The City: Reading Trans Autobiography as Romantic-Comedy" takes the structure of the trans narrative and combines it with the romantic-comedy genre in two films—*Better Than Chocolate* (1999) and *Boy Meets Girl* (2014)—in order to examine recent adaptations to the trans memoir genre (through YouTube and new media) and conflicting community dynamics (such as between lesbian separatists and trans lesbians). Ultimately, each film breaks down the binaries between cis/trans—but also country/city—and advocates for a trans architecture where the materiality of everyday life and gendered embodiment, along with gender difference, is maintained, respected, and given a happy ending.

Conclusion

Each one of these chapters seeks to discuss the lineage images, how they have become associated with trans experience, and analyze what this adaptation might convey about trans people, cis people, and America's role in these structures through its ever present and evocative image of the road. My dissertation aims to become a map of a history that has already existed between these two discourse communities and the representations they have made, and hopefully, by highlighting and emphasizing what is here, others—especially those outside the trans community—will no longer be as lost.

**Chapter One:
Based on a True Gender Journey:**

Adapting The Trans Story from Travel Text to Cinema Screen

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore how the trans memoir boom of the 1950-1970s influenced numerous mainstream films in the post-Hays production code featuring trans and gender nonconforming characters, especially those characters based on real-life people. I begin tracing these filmmaking techniques from the 1970 film *The Christine Jorgensen Story*, since Jorgensen's movie was one of the first made about an explicitly trans person,² and for the rest of the 1970s, every other film featuring trans or gender nonconforming characters seemed to borrow or reinterpret her story in some way. *Myra Breckinridge* (an adaptation of Gore Vidal's novel of the same name) along with *I Want What I Want*, *Women in Revolt*, *Let Me Die A Woman*, and multiple works by John Waters are some of the titles which came out during this era and demonstrated the affective and political changes due to the lifting of the Hays codes, the feminist liberation movements, and a proliferation of pulp material featuring trans and queer people (Elsaesser 53; Russo 61-70; Stryker *History* 53). Since these films are drawn from source texts based on real life people, specific real-life situations, or novels which involve trans characters, each image of the trans body on screen appears to come with the tagline 'based on a

² Ed Wood's *Glen or Glenda?* predates *The Christine Jorgensen Story* by almost twenty years, and it has been said to be inspired by Jorgensen's story (so the real-life Jorgensen still becomes the associated source text), but I would argue that *Glen or Glenda?* is more about cross-dressing as it is understood during the 1950s rather than expressly transsexual identity as I will differentiate in this chapter. I also don't count Todd Browning's 1932 *Freaks* as a trans story, mostly because the gender ambiguous character in it is most likely inspired by intersex identities. Both of these films were made under the Hays Production code as well, something that severely hinders interpretation as well. See Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* for more on LGBT filmmaking during this era.

true story' even if it is never uttered or claimed as such. Being based on a true story marks many of these films as adaptations, and because of this, I rely on the work of adaptation scholars such as George Bluestone and Robert Stam in order to understand the page-to-screen process; I also turn to the more complicated issues of truth, authenticity, and fidelity brought up by Thomas Leitch, S.S. Park, and Gordon Slethaug in order to understand how films based on real life stories attempt to return to an original source, but often times manufactures those original conditions, which then becomes consolidated as a new source of truth on the screen. I argue that the adaptation process in this era empties the emotional perspective from the trans person's memoir, and rather than a co-creational environment where a trans person embodies their gender with the help of the medical institution, the audience watching the film is left with standardized shots and salacious details which favour a doctor's perspective over a trans person's lived authenticity and embodiment. Therefore, the travel narratives which are documented in many memoirs, such as Jan Morris's *Conundrum* and Deirdre McCloskey's *Crossing: A Memoir*, become compressed on the screen and transferred to the body of the trans patient, which is then revealed in a sexually exploitative way that only seems to favour doctors and cisgender people's perspectives, gazes, and assumptions. In particular, I highlight how the 1977 film *Let Me Die A Woman*, where the doctor himself is the narrative guide for the trans body, standardized much of the filmic trans body on-screen, shifting away from the shared perspective of doctor and trans patient in the memoir genre, and instead became solely focused on the doctor's clinical gaze. This gaze and the filmic tropes associated with it then becomes the standard gaze in the 2015 film *The Danish Girl*. Though these films are very different in their production and source texts, and are separated by over thirty years, each one demonstrates how the adaptation process has used the medical literature of a previous era to create a popular film which seems to be 'based on

a true story' but which only tells half the narrative. While the trans patient can now assume the body and materiality they have longed for in these memoirs on the screen, I argue that these early films and much later adaptations still leave much to be desired.

Adapting True Gender Stories

Thomas Leitch's *Adaptation and Its Discontents* saves the final chapter to discuss the complicated genre of the films that are, in some way or another, based on true stories. These films prove to be complicated in adaptation studies because they appear to be drawn from some kind of source (thus making them adaptations which draw from pre-existing materials such as a book), but the source text is one that is "authorless, publisherless, agentless" (282). Leitch uses the language of economy and copyright in order to classify how difficult it is deal with adaptation on true stories since people cannot necessarily own the truth or specific facts, and therefore the director, writer, or producers may not have to credit anyone with the story, but still face scrutiny for its veracity. Furthermore, he complicates the 'truth' behind these stories by citing historical films that do not use the tagline, though these films can still become "historical records of staging, performance, costuming, set decoration, and even representations of history. But they can no more be accurate records of the historical events they purport to represent than a film adaptation can be an accurate record of any particular source text" (282). Indeed, the difficulty in dealing with source texts in general (be they true or fictional, agent-less or agented) in adaptation studies is that *fidelity* to the original is more than adhering to the exact words on a novel's page or scenes in a play; fidelity is often defined through emotion, which is hard to pinpoint and even harder to claim as true. So when a film ends up making a statement like "based on a true story," it is often done "at the filmmakers' pleasure, [and] it appears only when it is to

the film's advantage" (Leitch 282); it is always "strategic or generic rather than historical or existential" (Leitch 283). The truth of the true story is not necessarily factually true, but what the audience will accept as true, and what the audience will believe as true, even if they may be skeptical of it at first. To evoke the truth is to evoke falsehood in the same breath, which deliberately toys with audience's expectations of their movie-going experience. As S.S. Park suggests, this experience has them become far more invested in the movie they are about to see: "A narrative appears to trigger a stronger response when attached to a 'true story' than to a story that is officially invented" (474). In a very Baudriallardian way, the reel of the screen, even if actors or set design is obviously not real and there is a warning about dramatization (as there is for historical re-enactments, for instance), starts to become real through the very possibility of being 'based on a true story. As Park notes, movie-goers seem to desire these films that seem true more than ever before (474-5).

For the films based on or about trans people in the late 1960s to the early 1980s, the truth claim of the source text becomes embedded in the identity of the trans person on the screen. In the case of *The Christine Jorgensen Story*, and the earliest memoirs of this era, it is a distinctly transsexual plotline which gives the film its sense of truth. Jay Prosser describes this plotline as one which

emerges as an archetypal story structured around shared tropes and fulfilling a particular narrative organization of consecutive stages: [1] suffering and confusion; [2] the epiphany of self-discovery; [3] corporeal and social transformation/conversion; [4] and finally the arrival 'home —the reassignment. (101).

The transsexual plotline is a story which relies on the somatization of the gendered self; it is a narrative that seeks to present the body beneath the expressions of gender and represent the feeling state of gender dysphoria, a term derived from the Greek which means “difficult to bear” (Prosser 104). Someone’s feeling of gender dysphoria then means that their gender (most likely their birth gender) is difficult to bear, and in order to heal the rupture between these two points, they seek out transition, often through medical and/or therapeutic treatment (Prosser 9). Prosser’s book *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* was landmark in advocating for a reading of trans people which focused on their materiality; while this desire and drive for the literalization of the gendered self was evident in the memoirs of the 1950s and beyond, the desire for corporeality was often overlooked in academic circles (especially in the 1990s as Prosser writes). Prosser’s work, along with the work of Vivian Namaste, Henry Rubin, and Stephen Whittle (to name a few) has been characterized by trans scholar Jack Halberstam as a “recommitment to essentialism within transsexual theory” which stemmed from an “emphasis in poststructuralist gender theories on performativity as a way of denying the need for some trans* people to undergo sex reassignment surgeries” (*Trans** 138). Julia Serano also critiqued this thread of queer vs. trans theory in her 2007 work *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*; the history of these specific debates and the tension between Judith Butler/poststructuralism and transsexual/transgender theory will be examined in more depth in Chapter Three. I bring up the difference here to mark how just how important Prosser’s work was for his focus on the transsexual identity, the plotline this identity facilitates, along with the medical records and memoirs which act as the source texts for any subsequent reading and rereading of this plotline, especially in the films about trans people in the 1970s.

What the mainstream public knew of trans identity during the 1950s well into the 1970s was this transsexual plotline as expressed and represented in memoirs, autobiographies, popular culture, and pulp material written by these authors (Stryker *History* 49-53).

As Prosser notes, the transsexual subject often tells their personal narrative both in and outside of the doctor's office, making them "arch storytellers" (113). In this sense, to be transsexual is to be truthful in some way; it is to confess a hidden feeling in a doctor's office and then co-create the means to manifest the truth underneath the skin through some form of medicalization and embodiment, and then afterwards, write a story about these changes in the form of a memoir (Prosser 9). In the early medical documents about transsexual people, such as Harry Benjamin's *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, trans people were encouraged to blot out their past lives in another gender; they forgot their personal history and told normalizing narratives instead (Stone 230). The era of autobiography, however, allowed for trans people to tell their full stories and still remain their newly embodied gendered self. Jonathan Ames also picks up on the transsexual author's need for corporeal identity *and* narrative truth in his edited anthology of trans memoirs called *Sexual Metamorphosis* when he states that a particular spectre haunts transsexual writing and representation. He draws his "haunted" assertion from a previous Michel Foucault statement that the 18th century was haunted by the "transvestite" and the 19th was haunted by the "hermaphrodite"; each of these figures, like the transsexual, "force[s] a re-examination of what it meant to be male or female, and raise[s], too, that old literary question of appearance versus reality" (xiii). The appearance vs. reality quandary is something that also haunts the adaptation process itself, and this schism only becomes magnified when the source both "is and is not a text" because it is based on a true story that can be "authorless, publisherless, agentless" (Leitch 282-5). When attempting to represent the transsexual narrative

in cinema through such an adaptation process, there is the truth of the trans person's story as told in the doctor's office (Prosser 9), their felt-sense of identity often called dysphoria (Prosser 104), and the truth how it is represented in the language of memoirs and autobiography (Prosser 113). It is the very act of narration itself, often post-surgery, which then helps to "heal the rupture in gendered plots" and becomes a "way of making sense of transition" (9). Narrative is the "link between locations; the transition itself" (9)—but as Prosser also points out in his book, this narrativizing bears a similar and sometimes contentious relationship to the truth. There is a co-creational environment where doctor and patient work out the feeling of gendered embodiment together during the transition process, but that environment can never be wholly neutral. So while autobiography does present the opportunity to tell the embodied truth of the gendered self, it can also be just as mediated as the past doctor's logics of "constructing a plausible history—learning to lie effectively about one's past" where "[w]hat is gained is acceptability in society" but at the cost of losing "the ability to authentically represent the complexities and ambiguities of lived experience" (Stone 230). The totalizing forces and the regulatory processes to which doctors adhere to when listening to the transsexual story can still be replicated in such memoirs, not to mention policed and mediated through restrictions on publishing. This is one of the many reasons why trans people must become "arch storytellers" (Prosser 113) and fluent in many different narrative genres, precisely because the truth of the gender identity can be complicated through a shifting audience and mediums; it is also why I think Stryker calls *Man Into Woman* by Neils Hoyer and about trans woman Lili Elbe a "biography" and not an autobiography, a point I'll return to when discussing *The Danish Girl* (History 53).

Prosser gives a good example of these tensions when discussing the difference between writing autobiography as a trans person or writing a thinly disguised fictional account as a trans

author, such as Leslie Feinberg did with *Stone Butch Blues*. While "[a]utobiography seeks to 'find out who you are,' [and] to reveal the naked facts of the subject; fiction conceals enough of the facts so that the truth can be read" (Prosser 193). For Feinberg, the truth of hir story was more complicated than a standard transsexual memoir could contain, especially since ze stops hir medical treatment over halfway through the novel, but still no less identifies as part of the trans/transsexual/queer community (Feinberg *Stone* 240-241). The truth in this case is individual and feelings-based, but it is also cultural and community-based. *Stone Butch Blues* is not just about Jess's struggle and overcoming/fulfilling of hir gender identity and how much it mirrors Feinberg's own life; it is also a novel about the community in which Jess is a part, and the historical archival practices ze engages with in order to find more people like himself (Feinberg *Stone* 263-4). As Prosser continues, the transsexual autobiography seems to actually "lessen the 'truth' of the transgendered subject in its very revelation of the facts"—especially those facts pertaining to the body and the minutia of surgery—but it also lessens the truth due to the specific needs or requirements that the audience's desires (Prosser 194). Prosser writes that, "the reader's desire for the facts of transsexual autobiography does tend to have the effect of a desubjectivizing 'interrogation,' [and so] Feinberg's metaphor suggests fiction as a tactical means for the transgendered writer to deflect such fascination with the literal" (194). The transsexual autobiography—and especially those autobiographies which Jonathan Ames has collected in *Sexual Metamorphosis*—are very literal. They engage with the minutia of surgery, and so they express truth in a very specific way, one that is predicated on facts of the body, but one that does not necessarily resonate across all transsexual/transgender life experiences.

The transsexual person in the genre of the autobiography, especially during this era where pulp covers and mass market paperbacks reigned, then becomes configured as a kind of truth

embodied. The 'trapped in the wrong body' trope, though acknowledged by numerous trans people as an "unfortunate metaphor," is an "unfortunate metaphor that conveniently conforms to cultural expectations" (Borenstein 66; see also Sandy Stone 230-1), and because of this, it is the metaphor which becomes a main narrative tool to tell these stories—especially as they are introduced into popular culture and adapted to the screen. The trans memoir as a source text for film becomes "a secularized, authorless Book of Life not to be confused with reality or history" but nevertheless used to evoke "specific kinds of textual authority, [which has] only an incidental relation to historical accuracy" (Leitch 285); for a trans film to seem true, the transsexual person's gender identity must seem true, and in order for that to work, the 'wrong body' narrative—at least in these early films mostly written, directed, and produced by cisgender people—must be represented in some way. The 'wrong body' is the feeling of gender dysphoria (Prosser 69); it is the "true" of the true story, but since this feeling is precisely a feeling—meaning in Leitch's terms it "is and is not a text"—it is extremely difficult to represent in standard adaptation language and processes (Leitch 280).

As I mentioned before, most adaptations are from page-to-screen; in most cases, there is a novel as a source text which acts as a basis for what will then be translated from the words of the page to the movie screen and set (Corrigan 23). There is obvious room for variation—most films are rarely an exact match of page-to-screen—but the goal for many early adaptation cases (and the scholars who then wrote about these case studies) tends to be *fidelity*. In a way, the goal is to produce the most truthful adaptation from the original, but without necessarily including all the incidents, details, or facts from the original. Sometimes this means cutting a character; a scene; or even something as large as an entire side-plot. Other times, the adaptation process veers too far from the original source text, loses its elusive grip on fidelity, and the audience loses faith (or

affinity) with what has been produced. Sometimes, however, the adaptation deviates so far from the original words from the source text, but manages to keep the emotional core of the intact, and the adaptation process is successful, both economically *and* emotionally. (I would list 1995's *Clueless* as a good example of the latter and note that its source text was Jane Austen's *Emma*; similarly, I would remark that the 1984 adaptation of *Dune* is an example of the former since David Lynch, the director, wanted his name removed from the project; there are many examples in Leitch's work, Stam's, Hutcheon's, and Slethaug's *Adaptation*). Because these ideas of faithful and fidelity appear to shift and change—and are not directly bound to the exact facts of the source text—fidelity itself as a critical tool has been seen as lacking, especially in the era of postmodern filmmaking (Snyder 111-113). Moreover, these words—truth, fidelity, emotion, and faithful—are not accidental. They are emotional at their core. Indeed, precisely because there is often a previous relationship with the story in its original form (such as a book), adaptations and their critiques often rely on this type of emotional, moralistic, and gendered language—for good and for ill (Snyder 112-113; see also Slethaug *Adaptation* 17-19). I see the same emotional language at work in trans life writing of this era, and they too, as Prosser notes, share a complicated relationship to feelings, truth, and very literal “revelation of the facts” of the transsexual plotline (Prosser 194).

Yet, like Park, I also agree that "regardless of whether a certain perception is real or not, what passes as authentic remains central to our sense-making" (478) especially in relation to films that seem to be based on a true story, a true person, or a historical event and the memoirs which inspire them. Whatever “passes as authentic” (478) to the audience, writers, directors, and/or produces as a transsexual experience ends up being what defines transsexual cinematic representation, especially in this era. Whether or not the version of reality represented on-screen

is what actually happens to the trans person, or what trans people collectively agree is an accurate representation of their experiences, and whether or not a trans person is a real or a fictional character, when a film has a trans character in it, it seems to evoke an appeal to truth.³ When traced backwards to find the source, these origins are often found in the memoirs and autobiographies of the 1950-1960s and other popular medical texts which Ames documents. The first one of these narratives to present the fully realized transsexual plotline on-screen is Christine Jorgensen.

Jorgensen's Gender Journeys

In 1970, MGM released the film adaptation of Christine Jorgensen's *A Personal Autobiography* entitled *The Christine Jorgensen Story*. While Jorgensen was not the first trans person—or even the first transsexual patient to receive surgery and medical care—she can easily be seen as the first transgender celebrity (Stryker *History* 49; Kelly). When her plane landed in New York City in 1952, after her final medical procedure in Denmark, there were paparazzi waiting for her; a subsequent headline the next day bore the boldfaced title “EX-GI Becomes Blonde Bombshell” (Kelly). Jorgensen then wrote a series of essays about her experiences for *The American Weekly Magazine* and later turned the bulk of this into her memoir, *A Personal Autobiography*, which would be the source material for Irving Rapport's 1970 film. Though parts of her real life story were fictionalized for a cinematic audience, the core of the story remained the same: Christine struggles with gender at a young age, only to discover transsexual identity and gender affirmation surgery through Doctor Victor Dahlman (Christian Hamburger in

³ In the many films that Leitch cites in his chapter on the true story, there are several which contain trans people: *Dog Day Afternoon*, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, *Boys Don't Cry*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, and many other horror films that purport to be about the same cross-gender killer derived from the real-life person of Ed Gein. To me, this seems to link the concept of fidelity to a text and fidelity to an identity/gender.

real life), which then inspires her to travel to Denmark in order to obtain medical care before she returns home to the US.

When adapting Jorgensen's autobiography to the screen, the changes Irving Rapper made (such as shortening her family history and some of her military past) were done in order to fit her story into a two hour film. These changes were made to remain faithful to the original work, but also with respects to the inherent limitations of the film genre itself. As adaptation theorist George Bluestone notes, though both film and text are "time arts" they express and experience time in very different ways" (61). For Bluestone, "the formative principle in the novel is time, [whereas] the formative principle in film is space. Where the novel takes its space for granted and forms its narrative in a complex of time values, the film takes its time for granted and forms its narrative in arrangements of space" (61). In effect, film must represent time passing visually, usually through scenic cues (a fade to black sequence; night-time becoming daytime), while the novel cannot represent time visually and must articulate it in the text (with words like tomorrow, later on, hours passed, or even scene-breaks like asterisks). The difference between time-as-text and time-as-space can easily be seen in the memoirs of trans writers and the subsequent films made about trans people. The self-realization narrative so common in these stories is one that locates the self in a particular period of time—often childhood imaginings of the self and struggles—and then transposes a gender realization onto that moment from a current understanding of the self (Illouz 52; see also Prosser).

For instance, Christine Jorgensen opens her 1967 *A Personal Autobiography* with the story of her grandfather's immigration to the United States from Denmark. "As is the case in history of most American families, the Jorgensens immigrated to the United States from a foreign land"; she soon follows this statement with how "possible that my attachment to the

world of make believe was influenced even before I was born, for my paternal grandfather, Charles Gustav Jorgensen, came to this country from Odense, Denmark, the birthplace of Hans Christian Anderson" (1). The story of Charles moving with "only his skills and a determination to prosper" (1) from a country that is seemingly magic itself is meant to act as both an origin point of her family along with her own gender identity; it is a story that, inherently, must be written backwards after the ending is already known (Illouz 52). Jorgensen starting her story in Denmark works to naturalize her place as a trans woman since it is her relationship to Denmark through her grandfather which allows her to return to the country decades later in order to receive her gender reassignment surgery; moreover, her narrative as a trans memoir must also start with a look back towards her childhood in order to disrupt the audience's possible assumptions of her birth gender. Christine Jorgensen was born to a family of immigrants, but she was not born as Christine Jorgensen. This is important to note, and so, the transsexual plotline in memoirs often begin backwards, so to speak, in order to better represent (or re-present) the current moment. In order to represent Jorgensen's gender realization on film, however, Irving Rappaport must take the memory of her understanding her gender identity—which is located in the time-art of her memoir—and represent it in the space-art of the film reel. In other words, the story cannot start backwards like it does in a memoir because two ideas of time are happening at once through her words and narration; the story on the screen must start at the beginning of the story and establish that difference *visually* and spatially right away. In this example, Jorgensen's story must then begin in childhood and start with dysphoria, rather than the "magic" or "make believe" of two simultaneous timelines (1).

The first scene in *The Christine Jorgensen Story* is of a child named George (played by a young male actor named Trent Lehman) during a Christmas function; George is teased and

experiences difficulties with his birth masculinity before time passes through scene breaks and George becomes an adult through a change in actors (now played by John Hansen). When George realizes there is such a thing as gender transition—allowing George to fully become Christine—there are also several flashbacks into her childhood to help illustrate these gender realizations. It is only after this subsequent flashback now paired with the doctor's offering of transition that George can become Christine on-screen. Visually, Hansen remains as the actor who plays the same character, but he now dons wigs, dresses, and make-up to mark him visually as the more feminine version of Christine. Casting cisgender male actors, both young and old, to play Christine allow the director to visually represent the 'wrong body' narrative by actually presenting the wrong, masculine looking body which was then further queered on screen through visual "cinematic codes" (White 97) that had been used in past films. While Hansen's role as Christine works to visually represent the disruption of her identity through a struggle of gender mismatching and dysphoria, this casting choice favours the (cisgender) doctor's perspective, since Hansen is only there to represent what the doctor sees: a perfectly 'normal' man who wishes become a woman. Similarly, the close-up shots of Christine's face in her mirror as a young child becomes the way to access her interior anguish at the mismatched body in the mirror. Rather than have the mirror become the access point to interiority, which Prosser claims it does in trans memoirs (and which I will discuss in more depth in Chapter Two and especially Four), the mirror in cinema becomes sublimated into the camera's lens and the audience's gaze. At that point, the audience no longer sees Christine looking at herself, but themselves looking at her. In her memoir, she may have expressed her dysphoria from her perspective, thereby giving her interiority a chance for understanding and compassion, but the limitations of film render her interior monologue as obsolete. Her dysphoria must become adapted as a landscape visible on

her body *for someone else to see*. And so, as a young child looking at the mirror, the audience only sees tears and unkempt make-up (figure 1), which will then become the “very revelation of the facts” through surgery and medicalization in the second half of the film (Prosser 194). The detail-oriented focus on her surgery in the film, and the films of this period, seem more like medical case studies which treat the body as a spectacle of difference; it seems more like Harry Benjamin’s work is the source text rather than Jorgensen’s. Indeed, after witnessing the release of her film, Jorgensen worried that it would become yet another B-movie that exploited the transsexual person rather than helped them (“Notes on People”; Pearlman), and she soon began demanding more money/compensation for her time and her story on screen. While Jorgensen as a memoirist could balance the doctor’s ruminations of her body in her memoir with her own experience, cinematically, her words matter less than the doctor’s confirmation of her ‘problem’ and the representation of that ‘problem’ on screen through her body and these cinematic codes.



Figure 1: Young Christine puts on make-up (from *The Christine Jorgensen Story*).

Credit: screenshot from *The Christine Jorgensen Story* (MGM Studios); taken by author.

These cinematic codes are particularly important to note, however, especially as they change their meaning when elicited in *The Christine Jorgensen Story*. As Patricia White notes in

her book *Uninvited: Classic Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability*, the Hays Production Code which existed from the early 1930s to the late 1960s did not permit queer identity to be named outright; instead, a complex series of visual cues and narrative tropes indicated lesbian or gay desire on-screen. Several of these visual codes appear in *The Christine Jorgensen Story*, especially during the mirror scene discussed earlier where young Christine wears a dress. Cross-dressing was one of the major indicators of queer identity in the Hays era (White 12; 53), but this scene with cross-dressing also contains a popular motif in transsexual memoirs of the mirror (Prosser 99-110). This motif, coupled with the messed-up lipstick, along with earlier scenes of the then-George being teased with a girl's name (Georgette), are now used to indicate gender confusion, rather than sexual identity confusion, thus turning the previously used cinematic codes towards a new conclusion. As Vito Russo notes in his history of LGBT cinema, "transvestism and transsexualism were used interchangeably with homosexuality and with each other," thereby making the differentiation between these two identity groups quite difficult especially during the Hays era where no one was allowed to say anything different (78). Not only did censorship prohibit identity groups from representing themselves as they wanted, but during this era there was also not enough of a solidified language with which to represent this difference in mainstream and popular films. Many doctors still conflated gender identity and sexual identity (see Henry Rubin and Serano *Whipping Girl*), thus making filmic representations of them as separate, distinct categories nearly impossible historically. *The Christine Jorgensen Story* marks a distinct change insofar as trans identity is now being seen as separate from gay/lesbian identity, history, and representation, and her film also represents a distinct narrative trajectory assigned to these previously clandestine cinematic codes: Jorgensen wasn't merely

dressing in women's clothing or putting on make-up in front of a mirror as a young child because she was a homosexual or inverted; she was doing so because she was *transsexual*.

After assigning meaning to these cinematic motifs, Jorgensen's story provides an answer to the confusion, pain, and sadness her 'wrong body' (and the wrong body of John Hansen) represents: surgery/medicalization. In the film, she is ushered into surgery almost right away after meeting Dr. Victor Dahlman, and soon wakes up as Christine in her bed. The fade-to-black and her waking up as Christine becomes the way in which the "vacation, or an overseas trip" (Aizura, "Persistence" 142) analogy for the gender journey becomes visually represented. Indeed, this vacation motif is common among transsexual memoirs of this era and seen in works such as Deirdre McCluskey's *Crossing: A Memoir* and Jan Morris' *Conundrum*, both of which turn their gender transitions into literal gender journeys, often to foreign countries (Morocco and Australia), much like Jorgensen's trip to Denmark. Gender transition as a travelogue offers another way in which the space-art of the film can be used in the adaptation process in order to represent the time-art of the written transsexual plotline—and do so while maintaining the same emotional core of the source text in its adaptation process. In both visual and written accounts of the transsexual plotline, the act of movement and travel can "synchronize the metaphorical return to the protagonist's gendered home with an account of their arrival at the protagonist's literal home" (Aizura "Persistence" 142). On the first page of Jorgensen's memoir, she alludes to this travel narrative through her connection to Denmark where she uses "old immigrant tropes of prosperity and upward mobility to justify her acceptance as a woman" and thus links the notions of "sex change and migration" (Schewe 2-3). Furthermore, the ending of *The Christine Jorgensen Story* where she walks off the plane and into the horizon becomes both her narrative homecoming to the US *and* her bodily homecoming as Jay Prosser discusses (101; Aizura,

"Persistence" 142-4). This return home often exists through a return trip *back* to the country/place of origin, effectively making the transsexual travel narrative boil down to "a vacation, or an overseas trip" that occurs once and never again (Aizura "Persistence" 142). Since the vacation motif common in transsexual stories of this era compresses the nuances of gender transition (which often takes place over months and years) down to a single act, it devotes much of the film's time and conceptual space to the act of surgery itself. While Jorgensen tries to represent her journey to Denmark as her homecoming on the first page of her memoir, her narrative does not truly end until she arrives in New York City on that plane; and indeed, this is where Rapport ends his film, thus remaining faithful to at least one aspect of her memoir. This ending solidifies the new cinematic codes which render Christine's plotline a transsexual story, and also demonstrates her narrative homecoming as a success story, one of social mobility, "sex change and migration" (Schewe 2-3). It is also a narrative which marks her as a tourist. She travels for her surgery, like numerous other transsexual writers have documented, but these voyages cannot be entirely neutral, in the same way that the doctor's wording and presence in the film adaptations is hardly neutral. Travelling to another country for surgery, and then returning home where one can now be "socially mobile" renders these transsexual narratives alongside the "Euro-American geographical narratives about the shaping of the (colonized) world into a center, a here, and a periphery or elsewhere—a destination and a home to which to return" (Aizura, "Persistence" 140-1). Both Nael Bhanji and Aren Aizura have critiqued the transsexual travel narrative for its latent imperialism and I am in full agreement with their readings; what I'd like to argue is that, when adapted to the screen, these imperialist longings now become transplanted—like trans person's symptom of gender dysphoria—onto the time-space of the film through the filmic construction of the transsexual body. In other words, the doctor's perspective in these

films, as represented in the camera's gaze, now becomes the perspective of a traveller, a discoverer, someone whose heroics in medical science mark him out as different and therefore able to "triumph over nature" (Stryker "My Words" 248).



Figure 2: Movie Poster for *The Christine Jorgensen Story*.

Credit: MGM Studios.

The doctor as imperialist conqueror can be seen through the intense focus on Dr. Dahlman in *The Christine Jorgensen Story* and through the visual rendering of the screen posters (see figure 2) where her face is split in two. The splitting of Christine Jorgensen's face into a male and female side visually represents of the split pronouns which Harry Benjamin often uses in his case studies in order to illustrate the transsexual plot in medical documents; the split face also represents a literal border that the doctor (and Christine) must cross when travelling into her home gender. I have quoted at length from a case history in which Benjamin dubbed "an example of success" (104) from a transsexual woman named Joanna in order to better demonstrate its similarity to Christine's story and the crossing of pronouns and the self:

Jonathan, usually called Johnny, was twenty-four years old when I saw him first. He was a miserable, unhappy young man of rather short stature, slightly overweight and moderately underdeveloped sexually, a transsexual of the VI type

in the S.O.S. He worked in a restaurant as a checker. One of the headwaiters was homosexual and gave our patient a bad time with his unwanted propositions.

While Johnny was attracted to men, he disliked homosexuals. "They want another man," he said, "but I feel I am a girl."

Finally Johnny had saved enough money, his family was understanding, and a psychiatrist to whom I had sent him definitely recommended surgery. One year later, he went to Europe (in 1955) and, in those earlier years, had only a castration and penectomy done. An American surgeon, two years later, fashioned a well-functioning vagina.

Then Johnny (now Joanna), met a man a few years older than he (now she) when she was working as a receptionist in a dentist's office. He was and still is a reasonably successful salesman. He fell in love with Joanna and married her. He knows only that Joanna as a child had to undergo an operation which prevented her from ever menstruating or having children. They have had a distinctly happy marriage now for seven years. Joanna no longer works but keeps house and they lead the lives of normal, middleclass people. To compare the Johnny I knew with Joanna of today is like comparing a dreary day of rain and mist with a beautiful spring morning or a funeral march with a victory song. The old life in the original (male) sex is all but forgotten and is actually unpleasant to be recalled. (105).

Johnny only becomes Joanna *after* surgery, like Christine Jorgensen only becomes Christine after she meets the doctor on-screen. The successful crossing of this border, much like the successful surgery practices, is only configured from the doctor/explorer's perspective. In the

preface for *Transsexual Phenomenon*, Benjamin compares his medical work to that of a pioneer (1-3), and in doing so, turns the transsexual body into a place to explore, inhabit, and conquer—much like some of the transsexual memoirists write about the country they visit (Jan Morris’s *Conundrum* has a good example of this when she visits Morocco and sees herself as a “wizard” among “pungent Arab smells” (120); Aren Aizura’s 2018 book entitled *Mobile Subjects* also delves deeper into these comparisons and the biomedical tourism industry). When adapted for the screen, the transsexual body as landscape becomes literal through full shots and intense scrutiny of the cinematic body (something of which I explore in more depth in the next section with *Let Me Die A Woman*). While Christine Jorgensen’s dysphoria has been present all along in her movie—and the audience witnesses it as such through the child version of herself—it can only be rendered visually through a doctor’s presence on-screen in order to act as an interpreter for the previous pain. This is partly due to the restrictions of film (its ability to represent time spatially, or at least, the same way as the memoir can) but also the restrictions of the cisgender writers, directors, and producers and the cisgender target audience. The adaptation of *The Christine Jorgensen Story* is never going to feel like it is faithful to an original source text, even if it represents the ‘facts’ of Jorgensen’s story, precisely because the emotional content it attempts to represent is lost through the adaptation process in numerous ways. In other words, the true story on which this film is based loses its origin point the moment it becomes visual rather than textual due to the assumptions made by doctors in this era and how these assumptions are extended onto the screen. While Christine may look like herself through Hansen’s wigs and make-up, and the audience may have a solid interpretation for these acts on-screen since the cinematic codes have changed through her real-life story and status, she only truly *becomes*

Christine after the surgery, much like Joanna. Only then can she be "an example of success" (Benjamin 101) and this success is defined through a doctor's imperialist lens.

Though this may seem as if it is copacetic to the outline of the archetypal narrative of which Prosser solidified in his work, I wish to suggest that the cinematic gaze itself makes it difficult to capture the nuances of the transsexual plotline from both the doctor *and* patient perspective. When adapted to the screen, the emotional and textual content of transsexual narrative plot from memoirs becomes sublimated *into* the transsexual body, but the body as perceived and witnessed by doctors. So often, these doctors become explorers; the truth of the gender feeling now becomes the facts which cisgender audience desire to discover, rather than the feeling of materiality and embodiment that memoirists from this era published. In this way, the transsexual body becomes a crafted cinematic object, and as I explore in the next part, this crafted object can easily become objectified and sexualized through the camera lens.

Big Reveals

Seven years after the release of *The Christine Jorgensen Story*, Hygiene Films released *Let Me Die A Woman*, a pseudo-documentary film featuring several transsexual women as they seek surgery from a doctor named Leo Wollman, who acts as a narrative guide for the film. As Wollman explains the procedures, the transsexual women expand on their feelings in a group therapy session or one-on-one to the camera. Leslie, the main transsexual woman, passes so well that when she stares into the camera and states "last year, I used to be a man" it sets up the shock reveal and dictates the emotional core for rest of the film. Cinematically speaking, *Let Me Die A Woman* embodies the true story of the transsexual plotline, as mishandled by cisgender writers/producers/directors, because it makes the connection between the cisgender obsession

with gender and the doctor's medicalized gaze in cinema storytelling transparent. Doctor Leo Wollman is held up as the ideal guide for the film; many of the shots are framed around him narrating at a table while he explains the transsexual women in the film as case studies. Not only does he have insider knowledge of transsexual people because he is a doctor much like Harry Benjamin, but he is cisgender, like the target audience is assumed to be. Without access to a transsexual person's interiority through written text and language in the filmic adaptation, the transsexual body is offered up and put on display for medical science, research, and sexual objectification.

The doctor's gaze blurs with the cisgender gaze in *Let Me Die A Woman* precisely because of the intense focus on sexualizing the transsexual body. In Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" she discusses how the male gaze in film is ordered by "sexual imbalance" and how "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female," meaning that the "male gaze projects its phantasy [sic] on to the female form which is styled accordingly" (808-9). All of film is constructed around this male gaze, as is most of media, leading to John Berger's statement that, "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (47). I would add another paradigm of cis/trans to the roles of looking in this case, outlining that the cisgender gaze delights in the transsexual body, something of which Julia Serano has written about at length in her work *Whipping Girl* (35-52). Since the transsexual body on-screen is crafted through an appeal to a source text, it can be easy to find the source of the same scopophilic delight in medical research; indeed, this is what Foucault has dubbed the "clinical gaze" (*Birth* 85;94) along with the power and pleasure of medical research (*Sexuality Vol 1* 30-50). This clinical gaze is similar to the camera lens.⁴ In addition, since

⁴I view both the camera lens and the doctor's intent as representing the normalizing and totalizing forces behind some surgical practices, rather than depicting medicalization's ability to "heal the rupture in gendered plots" or

doctors like Wollman (and the real life Harry Benjamin) concern themselves with the use of the genital organs, as well as the functionality of them, the goal of the surgery becomes blurred with the assumed sex roles of women and men. In short, because these doctors (fictional and filmic alike) must focus on how genitals work, they end up conflating sex roles with genital function. For instance, the genital shots in *Let Me Die A Woman* exist to demonstrate the body before and after surgery in order to establish a schism of success/failure, while also articulating a sexualized role to be inhabited by the transsexual women. The soft-core scenes that appear after the surgery are there to cater to the sexualized gaze, turning the transsexual woman into "exhibitionist" where "women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (809). The same "to-be-looked-at-ness" for transsexual people in film means that their genitals are on display since it displays difference (visual cue for 'wrong body') and that difference enables the role of the doctor, since he is the one to fix this problem through his understanding of the transsexual body as visual landscape to conquer. Another example of this in *Let Me Die A Woman* occurs when a transsexual woman rips her vagina in a sex act; Doctor Wollman attributes it to her "sex impatience" and treats her in the hospital yet again for another two weeks until she is healed. His condescending tone mirrors exactly what Harry Benjamin says in *The Transsexual Phenomenon* about a transsexual woman who wants to try out her new vagina as a "toy" though he cautions her strongly against it (95). The cisgender gaze becomes the medical gaze in these films, but the medical gaze easily slips into the sexualized gaze since the body of the transsexual woman is constructed in order to become the perfect sex object and 'proper'

achieve embodiment for the transsexual subject (Prosser 9). It is not that surgery itself is inherently exploitative; that is not what Stone, Stryker, or even Prosser depict in their writing, and it is not what I'm arguing here. Only that the adaptation process in the 1970s era of filmmaking renders these narratives involving surgery to their most basic details, and in doing so, do not represent the diversity of trans experience and voices.

woman (Serano *Whipping* 34-5). Since film is constructed around the assumed cisgender male gaze, it means each iteration of a transsexual body on screen becomes the ideal object to delight in while also naturalizing the delight as part of the transsexual identity itself. To be transsexual on the screen is fundamentally different than being transsexual in memoirs, and the repeated sexualization in *Let Me Die a Woman* is one of many examples from this era of filmmaking.

The same sexual explicitness surrounding images of transsexual women can be seen in the film version of *Myra Breckinridge*, which came out the same year as *The Christine Jorgensen Story*. While originally a novel written by Gore Vidal that was critical of the gender movement and the second-wave radical feminists of the 1960s, once adapted to the screen, I argue that the spectacle of bodily difference takes over and empties the film of any interiority or possible worthwhile critique. Rachel Welch plays Myra, a trans woman who undergoes gender affirmation surgery and then goes to Hollywood to see her uncle Buck Loner for money as Myron's (her former male name) widow. Rex Reed plays Myron and he is only in the film until the surgery where all focus becomes on Myra and Myra alone. Unlike *The Christine Jorgensen Story*, which used thinly-veiled homoerotic imagery to solidify Hansen as a masculine presence who would soon be feminized in order to mark the drastic difference between Hansen as a man (George) and Hansen as a woman (Christine), *Myra Breckinridge* opts for completely different actors to demonstrate this change. Similar to the face-splitting posters meant to represent the fragmentation of pronouns, using two different actors creates a visual embodiment of the 'wrong body' and acts as a reveal of subsequent gender identity. The gender transformation happens from Rex Reed to Raquel Welch, thereby representing the surgery as an absence between two different bodies. In addition to the "overseas trip" (Aizura, "Persistence" 142) where Myra "goes abroad and comes back a broad" (Benjamin 43), Myron changes into Myra through a literal

different person. Not only does Myra now actually become a woman (through a cisgender actress), but she also becomes a sex symbol through the casting of Raquel Welch. *Myra Breckinridge* becomes a film about the aftermath of her surgery more than anything, signifying the sexual prowess and conquest of her newly crafted vagina that the doctor has discovered and developed.

When in the operating room, the doctor remarks that, "once cut off, you know it won't grow back, right?" illustrating the doctor's role as someone who not only possesses and crafts the body into a sex symbol, but knows more about her body and interiority than she does. From here, Myra's body is consistently framed as larger-than-life using angled shots that gaze up at her tall body—thus marking the body's history as a formerly masculine—while also highlighting that body's sex appeal by hinting at what's beneath her skirt. Myra becomes an object of fascination to doctors—and she becomes national spectacle, since the iconic cover image has her in an American flag bikini and her consistent romps in Hollywood points to the culture's fascination with the 'tell-all' status embodied in narratives of transsexuality. Each pan of the camera is both an interrogation of Myra's past as male while also a hopeful invitation and endorsement of Myra's future as sex and national object. In the novel, Myra's sex appeal is partly due to the underlining assumption being critiqued during this time period of the perfect woman being made by a man, since it becomes an inversion of Berger's initial quotation in *Ways of Seeing*. If man looks at woman and she merely watches herself be looked at, then in a way, it's the man that creates what is ultimately defined as beautiful; to adopt this idealized image for himself as a transsexual woman would be a perfect inversion.⁵ This is what Vidal attempts to demonstrate

⁵ This is also the same highly problematic and regressive mentality presented in Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire*, which Vidal was surely using in some way to influence his own construction, since he seems to present Myra in the similar language of the double agent that Raymond uses; Myra is sneaky and deceptive as well, much like Serano would later remark (*Whipping* 39-41).

through Myra in the novel, but when translated to the screen, the "time art" of the novel must be formed into "arrangements of space" (Bluestone 60) on the screen, and so turns her body into spectacle, rather than treating the radical feminist movement with irony. While the book was praised, the film was critically panned for its explicitness and lewdness, partly because of the way in which the transsexual body became a direct link to pornography, rather than innovation or cultural commentary (Hadleigh 108).

The connection to pornography is not new. Sherilyn Connelly notes that the *mise-en-scène* of the trans person's genitals being exposed in film borrows its cinematic technique from pornography. Calling this trope "the big reveal" (97) she traces it from the porn films of the 1970s and directly links its construction on-screen to a violent act that often follows it. The language of revealing hints at the surgical act; a sudden reveal that works by unveiling the body through difference *also* compresses the time of transition into one frame. Time and identity become sublimated into physical space in the film through each act of a reveal, demonstrating the overnight vacation motif (Aizura, "Persistence" 142) and the visual difference of the transsexual body required for the success narrative to be fulfilled. Myra's body becomes a country, a landscape to explore, like Leslie's in *Let Me Die A Woman* becomes a surgical success story through a flash of a vagina that used to be a penis, because all the time leading up to this moment must be transformed into the moment itself. The vagina or the after-image of a transsexual body as represented in only Raquel Welch becomes a surface artifact meant to stand in for the feelings of the interior gendered self as represented in memoirs, but without the audience ever having access to that wholeness or interiority.

The camera pan itself—from the top of the head down to the exposed genitals and then back again—is a technique which contains all of the previous imperialist connotations embedded

in the overseas trip boiled down to an image, and it is an image that is consistently reproduced in cinema at this time because it seems like it belongs there. If to be transsexual is to have surgery, as these films seem to argue through their teleological adaptation of the transsexual plotline, then a doctor's gaze must go up and down the body in order to demonstrate scientific 'proof' of that 'wrong body' has now been amended. The big reveal may have started in pornography and then moved into the exploitation cinemas of 42nd street (Ward 133; Connelly 76-78), but it did not stop there. Jack Halberstam also notes a similar camera panning technique in other trans depictions from the 1990s like *The Crying Game* to *Boys Don't Cry* (*Queer Time* 76-97); the director for New Line cinema Jeff Katz also notices the similarity between *The Crying Game* and horror films of the 1970s and 1980s that consistently used trans women as the "she-male psychopath" (Ryan 180) and revealed their genitals and/or cross-dressed clothing as a way shock the audience; Katz even went so far as to remark that "Neil Jordan [director of *The Crying Game*] must have seen *Sleepaway Camp*" (Katz qtd. in *Going To Pieces*).⁶ In *The Crying Game*, when Dil (Jaye Davidson) meets Fergus (Stephen Rea), she is a nightclub singer and entices him from her position on the stage. At this point in the story, the audience does not know she is trans, and since the audience is aligned with Fergus's perspective, he does not know as well. Dil then represents woman as "exhibitionist" (Mulvey 809) through her voice as she bares her feelings through a song, but as she moves with Fergus to his room and the two start to remove clothing, the camera becomes Fergus's male gaze and unveils her genitals, turning her into trans woman as object, rather than (implied cisgender) *woman* as object. Dil's character may be depicted with tenderness and the film critically praised (Erickson-Scroth and Jacobs 63-5), but the trope's legacy and lineage has lingered in numerous film productions about trans people (and often

⁶ The 1983 slasher film *Sleepaway Camp* ends with the killer being revealed as Angela as she stands covered in victim's blood; in this same shot, the camera also pans to reveal her genitals as one of the counsellor's states, "she's a boy."

involving cisgender writers/directors/producers). In many ways, Dil and Fergus represent the new reconfiguring of the male gaze / woman object in film, since their coupling acknowledges the implicit power dynamic of "she-male" pornography which previously informs this camera panning technique; the new configuration is now cisgender white male gaze and transgender woman of colour as object.

While progress seemed to mark the trans movement during the 1970s—thanks to the bettering technologies associated with medical care and cultural visibility due to Christine Jorgensen's public case, along with the counter-cultural moments within the community like STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries [Stryker *History* 84])—*Let Me Die A Woman* demonstrates the core hegemonic ethos of the popular culture most succinctly. Through the adaptation process, the transsexual plotline from memoirs becomes sublimated into transsexual body, which removes interiority and important cultural history. These trans characters become surface details meant to stand in for the 'truth' of these true stories or "what passes as authentic" in this current era of cinematic sense-making (Park 478); these characters then stand-in for all transsexual people to a cisgender public because they all seem to be true. Or, as Sandy Stone remarks, these representations of trans people seem true partly because "bodies are screens on which we see projected the momentary settlements that emerge from ongoing struggles over beliefs and practices within the academic and medical communities" (229). These struggles also often

play themselves out in arenas far removed from the body. Each is an attempt [by a doctor, academic, or another person in higher authority] to gain a high ground which is profoundly moral in character, to make an authoritative and final explanation for the way things are and consequently for the way they must

continue to be. In other words, each of these accounts is culture speaking with the voice of an individual. (230).

In spite of trans people's real lives gaining recognition, on the cinema screen of the 1970s, it is the doctor's narrative “which passes as authentic” (Park 478) and so it seemed to represent the only narrative outside the trans community in the larger cisgender public. *Let Me Die a Woman*, along with other trans films from the 1970s like *I Want What I Want*, *The Christine Jorgensen Story*, and *Myra Breckinridge* solidified the filmmaking techniques surrounding the transsexual body: graphic images or details of surgery; a mise-en-scène that displays the trans person's pre- or post-op genitals; excessive montages and/or shots on cross-dressing, especially involving nylon stockings; and close-up facial shots framing the trans person's emotional confessional shots. These popular films could have represented a community of people, but instead they became a schlocky, trope-y, clichéd filled smattering of representations which solely seem to focus on the transsexual body as sexual object. These films became parodies of transsexual identity and denigrated the community they attempt to represent by rendering them as passive objects on the screen.

This legacy has lingered, especially within the cisgender popular culture. In Joelle Ruby Ryan's work on trans representation in film, she critiques several tropes (including the trans monster/killer, which I will discuss in the next chapter) that surround trans people on the screen and which reassert that “the production and dissemination of these images does not occur in a sociocultural vacuum” and seem to be made by those who are “oblivious to the fact that this is not just dress-up time for a sizeable minority of people in the US” (63). Though these are mere

representations—re-presentations and fundamentally not real—she also reasserts that all of these images matter because

perhaps unwittingly, [these films] function to reinforce the *already-circulating* stereotype of the transgender person as deceptive, as an interloper and as so self-obsessed that they are callous towards the needs and emotions of their fellow human beings. [...] whether or not the character identifies or is culturally classifiable as “transgender” is mostly a moot point. Images do not function in such a simplistic manner in terms of their circulation and the way that they help to construct hegemonic ideology. (63; emphasis mine).

In effect, these images are not real, and the experiences on the screen do not match up to real life trans people, yet they are still circulating with enough efficacy to stand in for something like truth. These images have become so common that there seems to be, as Rachel Carroll notes, a "desire to return to an 'original' textual encounter [and] as such, [these] adaptations are perhaps symptomatic of a culture's compulsion to repeat" in order to better understand the 'truth' of the gendered self to begin with (*Adaptation* 1). This lasting legacy and specific desire to repeat can be seen especially in the 2015 adaptation of *The Danish Girl*, which still utilizes many of the same tropes in order to tell a transsexual story from the real life case of Lili Elbe. In spite of numerous trans filmmakers, writers, and artists making different and compelling narratives and crafting numerous new stories in the decades since 1970's *The Christine Jorgensen Story*, *The Danish Girl* steps backwards into time in order to represent a different era of trans history (the 1930s when Lili Elbe was alive) and in doing so, also reverts back to the older framing techniques in order to represent the transsexual body.

Let Me Die a (Danish) Woman

The Danish Girl is about one of the first case studies of a transsexual woman named Lili Elbe, who was born Einar Wergner and had a successful career as a painter before transitioning in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The film, directed by Tom Hopper and starring Eddie Redmayne as Lili, is based on the 1999 book *The Danish Girl* by David Ebershoff, which is a fictionalized retelling of Lili's life and death shortly after a surgery performed by Doctor Kurt Warenkros in 1931. While *The Danish Girl* is about a real-life source, thus making it a film based on a true story and giving it the veil of authenticity, it cites this fictionalized account in its credits and not the 1933 biography about Einar Wergner by Niels Hoyer *Man Into Woman* as its source text. Some of this has to do with the fact that Lili Elbe died after one of her last surgical procedures and therefore did not have the ability to write her own memoir as Jorgensen and numerous other trans memoirists have done, so her own memoir could not be the film's main source text. Though *Man Into Woman* is considered to be one of the first memoirs about a trans person, and it is included as the second chapter in Jonathan Ames' collection on the genre, the text itself mostly consists of letters written to Lili's wife describing her gender struggles and identity, which Niels Hoyer then edits and restructures for a mass audience (which is then translated into English by James Stenning and re-issued in the 1950s as a pulp book on the popular wave of Jorgesensen's story [Stryker *History* 53]). Indeed, Susan Stryker refers to *Man Into Woman* as a "biography" (*History* 53); it is distinctly not an autobiography, which means that when Eberhoff goes to pen his own story, he can only fictionalize it. So while there is a record of Lili Elbe and her feelings about her gender, the structure—or transsexual plotline—that it can represent has always been in the hands of cisgender people outside of her own story, be

they her wife, her doctor, or the subsequent (and numerous) authors who have attempted to represent and (re)tell her story.

This is not a critique, necessarily, only a lineage I wish to comment on since it marks Lili's story—and therefore her adaptation process to the 2015 film version of her on-screen—as unique. In a way, I see Ebershoff's work less as an author of a novel but as a co-writer in a trans memoir; helpful for the (re)construction of a story, but mostly invisible since the work is not about their identity, but the trans person's life and their story. Lili's "authorial voice" (Prosser 9) has been channelled through him—as it has once been through Niels Hoyer, which was then even further channeled through her wife Gerda in their correspondences; and then when the book demanded an English market, Lili's "authorial voice" (Prosser 9) was channeled once again through a translator. In some lights, Ebershoff's novel and his attempt to fictionalize the account resembles Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* and his attempt to get at the truth with his own fiction, but since Ebershoff is not trans, and there are numerous decades since Lili's life and death, he cannot represent the same type of truth that Feinberg can, or even Hoyer can; Ebershoff writes a novel while Hoyer wrote a biography, and Stryker quite rightly sees that Lili is not actually present in any one of these versions of her life; only her mediated and remediated image is.

When it comes time to make the movie, however, these complicated authorship issues can be relegated to a screen credit. Since Ebershoff was merely a fictionalized cowriter of Lili's story, he is no longer needed in order to tell the story of her life; his identity becomes a statement on-screen which declares the film to "be based on the book by David Ebershoff." Though the claim of 'based on a true story' has now been replaced with "book by David Ebershoff" the same ambiguous verb of 'based' lingers and complicates the overall meaning of what is true and what

has been fictionalized (Leitch 280). *Any* text being "based" on something is unclear, as Leitch notes, since it offers no necessary "fidelity to the historical record" itself (285). What the tagline does offer, however, is "the implication that even before the film was made, a story was circulating that was not only about actual events but was a true account of them, as if extracting a story from actual events or imposing a story on them was unproblematic" and it is a claim that, once one discovers what Ebershoff's book is actually about (the life and death of Einar/Lili) and that there has already been a memoir-like work about this person, *The Danish Girl* may as well be a true story in this filmic sense (Leitch 285). In this unique case, the true story *does* have an agent, an author, and a publisher and rights can be paid out, but no one remembers Ebershoff's role since the story is not his own (and the other editor/writer of this story, Neils Hoyer, is no longer present). Moreover, the tagline of "based on the book by David Ebershoff" is at the end of the movie, not the beginning like most 'true story' taglines, further indicating that Ebershoff's role in this film is merely an afterthought (similarly, an after-screen epilogue also announces the work *Man Into Woman*, giving it a similar afterthought and added historicity, which I'll discuss in this chapter's conclusion). The film does not even declare Ebershoff's work as fiction—instead opting for the more ambiguous work 'book'—and thereby giving even his credit the allure of reality.

Like *The Christine Jorgensen Story*, *The Danish Girl* is about surgery and doctors as much as it is about travelling for these surgeries; Jorgensen and Elbe went to the same country and both utilize the 'overnight vacation' motif as an analogy for their surgery (Aizura "Persistence" 142). While there are only two real scenes of Lili on a train back and forth to obtain her medical care, the entire film is constructed around her body as a place to explore, which makes the usual quick 'reveal' scenes appear to be extended. Her gender transformation

from Einar to Lili happens so gradually over the course of the film that I see *The Danish Girl* as one long extended overnight vacation of gender transformation, one that stretches the transsexual body so far on screen that Lili literally becomes Denmark. This happens through the binary of the good/bad doctors in the film, Einar's past and artistic legacy, and by representing her overall dysphoria through her wife Gerda's art.

When Gerda Wegnar's (Alicia Vikander) model does not show up for her painting session, she asks Einar to pose for her in women's clothing. In that filmic moment, Lili is created through a clever inversion of the typical male gaze in cinema. Lili's objectification as "exhibitionist" (Mulvey 809) and "looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 808) starts at the hands of her wife who uses the male gaze in order to create the perfect image of a woman in art. As Lili grows more comfortable with her gender, she ventures outside the private space of the home to a party as Lili, where she soon starts a relationship with Henrik Sendahl (Ben Wishaw). As she ventures more and more into public, Lili becomes a separate entity, something held at arm's length from Einar; she is an art image, a spectre, a fake cousin that is a game she and Gerda play. The separation of the gendered self from the body is another manifestation of the 'trapped' or 'wrong body' narrative, along with the split pronouns, similar to the other visual representations such as Jorgensen's split face or the different actors playing Myron and Myra. Lili learns to fragment the self as a way to survive when around others, but she also does this when she is by herself. In a scene when Lili ventures out and dresses up without Gerda, she finds a mirror and gazes at her body, revealing it to the audience in the same way that Dil's body was revealed to Fergus in *The Crying Game* (see figures 3 and 4). The wife/male gaze as painter easily becomes the cisgender gaze which Lili has internalized and replicated as she stares at herself which is not quite herself (yet). It is also the moment when Lili seems to realize that playing a "game" is not enough, and

she must traverse and travel the distance of her body in order to fully inhabit Lili, which she then does through literal travel in the film.



Figure 3: The "big reveal" scene from Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game*.

Credit: Palace Pictures; screenshot taken by author.



Figure 4: Lili Elbe's internalized "reveal" moment in Tom Hooper's *The Danish Girl*.

Credit: Working Title Films; screenshot taken by author.

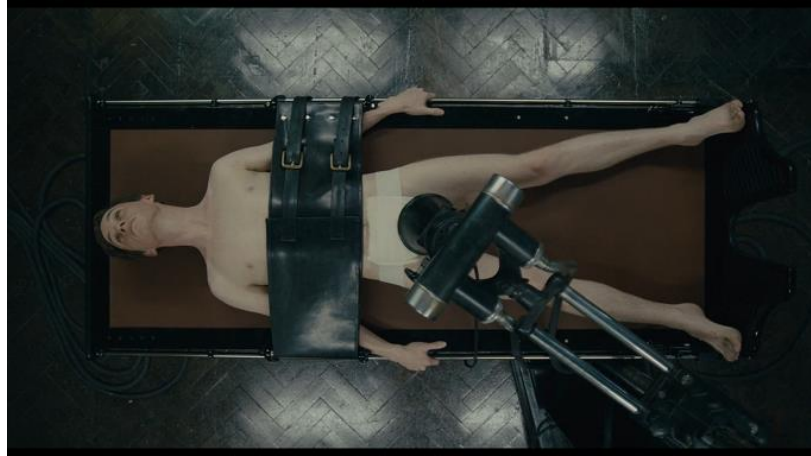


Figure 5: Lili Elbe is treated for her gender dysphoria by Dr. Hexler

Credit: Working Title Films; screenshot taken by author.

Lili's first few attempts to receive treatment for her gender dysphoria fail, however, and she is institutionalized for homosexuality and perversion. When Lili receives treatments for these issues, the machine itself radiates over her genitals in the exact camera panning technique as her dress-up session, thereby uniting all of these gazes into one central image/motif (see figure 5). By showing Lili's forced conversion therapy treatments, and then soon juxtaposing those with the doctor Warenkros (Sebastian Koch), the audience is supposed to feel sympathy for her character, and do so without questioning the medical or clinical gaze. When Lili and Gerda meet the doctor who will eventually perform her surgeries (Warenkros), he is kind and caring and Lili is visibly relieved. After expressing that she believes she is a woman inside, Lili says that maybe she and Gerda are insane, which the doctor soon rebuffs with his own admission of insanity and then stating that he believes Lili and Gerda. Part of this conversation is worth quoting directly from the film:

Doctor: I've met another man like you. I pursued his case. Against my colleagues wishes, of course. I told him I could operate and make him fully a woman. It was what he wanted.

Lili: Is that really possible?

Gerda: What happened to the man? Was the operation successful?

Doctor: On the morning of the first operation, the man ran away.

Lili: I wouldn't do that.

Several things occur at once during this exchange. The camera that pans over Lili as she gasps and asks, "Is that really possible?" focusing on her face in a moment of revelation. It is here where Lili starts to fully become Lili because she knows that the transsexual plotline is now possible. The medical gaze here constructs her not as an aberration (like Dr. Hexler and his radiation) but as *potential*; it is still on his perspective as a doctor who will discover her—and be alone in discovering her, since his work is against his colleagues' wishes, a point he is careful to mention in order to outline his practice as singular. The doctor in *The Danish Girl*, like Harry Benjamin, is a pioneer. While there is some sense of Lili's interiority and desires, I argue that this overall narrative construction still favours the doctor's perspective (to a fault) since this conversation also pits Lili against other patients by presenting the case study of the trans woman who ran away. The loss of a patient without the possibility of operating is a lamentation for the doctor, and Lili attempts to make herself that much better as a potential patient by asserting that she would never run away. It is a narrative that isolates, contains, and works to restrict the transsexual plotline's potential by only telling and emphasizing half the story. In *The Danish Girl*, the medical institution becomes invisible, like Ebershoff's authorship, because it is so prevalent and necessary for this particular half of the transsexual narrative. The film's focus is on Lili and her gender identity which can only be represented through the body, so that body is displayed and shown to us in all of its facets to the doctor and the audience. The vacation motif of surgery becomes adapted in Lili's literal train rides to and from the doctor's office; as soon as her condition has been named, she has a reason to travel and a reason to enact her nationality

along with her gender identity, and her train rides become like the exploratory scalpel where both she and the doctor are heading into unknown territory. Her "mythic" (Prosser 116) homecoming makes her into a different gender while affirming her nationality all along as *The Danish Girl*, similar to what Jorgensen did decades earlier through the connection to her grandfather.

Effectively, the film pits the good surgery/doctor and the bad surgery/doctors against one another in an attempt to demonstrate Lili's struggle for identity without ever interrogating the clinical gaze or medical involvement at all. It is not that surgery itself is bad or good; only that, like in previous films from the 1970s, the adaptation process makes it harder to access the full interiority of the transsexual patient who longs for materiality and embodiment. The transsexual plotline in *The Danish Girl* will also be fundamentally interrupted when Lili dies from the complications of surgery, which therefore denies her the ability to come home in her body and home in her country at the same time. While there is potential for the surgical narrative to be transformative and for trans patients to "rise up from the operating tables of our rebirth" (Stryker "My Words" 248), Lili cannot do that because the doctor does not want her to run away (or rise up), and also because she dies.

Lili also expresses discontent with her body (the prototypical gender dysphoria) through an invocation of landscape—specifically, 'the bog.' Early on in the film, Einar works at a landscape painting and Gerda teases him that he has fallen into the bog (which is part of the tree landscape he paints). After some gentle probing, Einar confesses that he won't disappear into the bog because "the bog's in me, silly." The bog, in effect, is Lili's way of describing her gender dysphoria without the medical language since that term had not been created yet (see Chapter Three and Henry Rubin for more on its history as a term). Instead, Lili's internal felt sense of a gendered self remains unknown to her (unexplored land—a bog) and also idealized (art object;

the bog rendered in painting). Lili's insistence on remaining Lili as the film progresses seems to represent another travel narrative as Lili slips into her own painting. Lili cannot be a game anymore because she must be something living and breathing, something natural like the land itself. Lili then uses the bog as a way to express her seemingly never-ending gender dysphoria, linking back to a consistent rhetoric of using the landscape as a way to project and think through progress inside of trans narratives (Bhanji 17). The film echoes this connection between the landscape and gender itself through the opening/closing shots of forest, trees, and lakes; furthermore, Lili takes her last name from a river as an attempt to become what she always wanted *and* what she found through painting. Lili's attempts to transform into Lili through landscape and art can be seen as yet another "persistent travel narrative" (Aizura "Persistence" 142) where she attempts to cross the border of the frame and live in a painting as a "one-way trip" (Aizura "Persistence" 142); since her life cannot be lived in that fantasy space, however, she must return to the real world—where she then receives surgery, making the bog that has been in her all along come out through a bodily transformation. The paintings in the films act like another gender reveal and confirmation of difference; the images that Gerda paints of Lili act as the best form of gender transformation, while all of Einar's previous landscapes now take on another meaning of dysphoria, which allows for parts of her self-realization narrative to be told backwards, after the ending is known (Illouz 52). When living in Gerda's paintings fails, and all other attempts to transition back to Einar fail, the only solution for Lili is to get on the train and complete her surgeries *and* give up her own landscape painting. I would also add that giving up her work at this point in the film effectively means she has given up all authorship as well. Her listless response when Gerda asks why she has quit painting further demonstrates that Lili is only object, and in order to feel like herself, must become the ultimate art object for Gerda while

denying her own interiority. She must literally become the bog, no matter if it consumes her whole.

Lili's emotional state after her surgery—from intense pain to elation and then subsequent jealousy of the cisgender woman she speaks with about childbirth—become what "passes as authentic" (Park 478) in this last section of the film. Whereas the film demonstrated Lili's 'wrong body' narrative as something that was contingent on artefacts (the dresses, nylons, paintings) in the beginning, Lili's emotions are presented as what drives her surgery and subsequent travel, especially the follow up doctor's visit where they discuss the implantation of ovaries and a womb. While this seems as if the film is representing the need and desire for embodiment as presented in many transsexual memoirs, I argue that the film actually places the onus of Lili's death on her shoulders. Lili's desperation for the surgery—as it is her "only hope" to become a woman—seems to be the cause for her death, especially as numerous others like Gerda warn her about its dangerous consequences. Only her desire to be a woman—not her doctor's interest in exploration and discovery—seem to be the reason she goes through with the operation; all risks seem minimal if she can, like Leslie from *Let Me Die A Woman*, die a woman as well. Precisely because her operation is *not* successful is the reason that its action seems like completely Lili's responsibility. Had she survived, however, she would have been the first success narrative, and the doctor would have stepped in and claimed authorship to his discovery (much like Benjamin has done with Joanna). Instead, in her final scene on-screen, Lili is The Danish Girl, a national body that has undergone gender transformation, before she passes away entirely. Jack Halberstam, in his most recent work on trans representation called *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Guide to Gender Variance* has remarked that the film seems to treat "surgery in a very oblique way and minimizes its risk" and which does not seem copacetic at all to the current debates in

trans healthcare (49). The movie, though it came out in 2015, seems rather archaic and like it belongs to another era entirely, not only in its source text, but in the way in which the truth of that text is presented.

Conclusion

The ending shot of *The Danish Girl* is Gerda losing one of Lili's scarves into the wind, and then letting the wind—and the hills of Copenhagen—have the scarf as a way of allowing Lili to finally become one with the landscape. It is presented as a happy ending, one where the narrative comes full circle and Lili lives on in memory and art. There is also a black screen which lists factual details of the Elbe case, naming her letters to Gerda as the basis for the "ground breaking memoir 'Man Into Woman'" by Neils Hoyer and stating that her "bravery and pioneering spirit remain an inspiration for today's transgender movement" (figure 6). Other than also using the language of the pioneer, the ending notes declare the film's 'true story' but presents it as a true story that has gotten better. By propping itself up against a perceived darker time, *The Danish Girl* attempts to present the idea that 'things used to be this way, but now they are way better' due in part to Lili and Gerda. Though *The Danish Girl* has been critically lauded (as its Oscar nominations and win attest to), it is also a film which has been repeatedly rejected by the trans community for its "recycled [and] tired trans tropes" (Wilson).

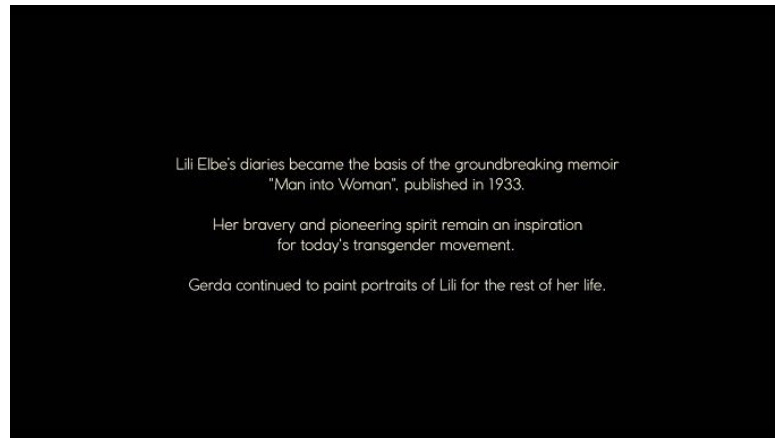


Figure 6: Last shot of *The Danish Girl* explaining its 'true source' before credits.

Credit: Working Title Films; screenshot taken by author.

As Thomas Leitch notes, yet "another strategy" that the based-on-a-true-story tagline does to its film is ask the audience "Isn't this sad?" (285). The perceived fidelity to history implies that it would have been "wonderful" if any recovery, or happiness, or the characters desire "could have been permanent rather than temporary. But it was not to be, as we know from consulting the record" (Leitch 285). *The Danish Girl's* Lili Elbe is yet another example of the cry of "Isn't that sad?" at the heart of the true story film, but she is not the only one, and she certainly was not the first. Christine Jorgensen from *The Christine Jorgensen Story*, Leslie from *Let Me Die a Woman*, and Lili Elbe from *The Danish Girl* are all turned into landscapes for the doctor or cisgender viewers to explore in their filmic adaptations, which rendered the transsexual body an eroticized and exploited object on the screen instead of faithfully drawing from the rich legacy of transsexual memoirs of the 1970s and beyond. *The Christine Jorgensen Story* and the other films of this era represent adaptations of the transsexual plotline, along with *The Danish Girl*, but an adaptation process which ends up favouring "very revelation of facts" over the emotional truth of the transsexual plotline (Prosser 194). Instead, these films end up producing some of the

more clichéd and problematic images of trans representation, and then end up informing the cisgender public's imagination through these repeated tropes and stereotypes. Though trans writers, directors, and artists are now producing their own work and adding their own voices to the canon of film and other media representation, the problematic storylines and casting choices still abound today, and demonstrate how this lingering legacy remains.

In an acceptance speech for his award-winning performance of a trans woman in the TV show *Transparent*, actor Jeffry Tambor stated that while he was proud to be awarded, there was still lots more work to do; Jack Halberstam also echoes this claim of "more work" while also acknowledging the leaps and bounds of representation (*Trans** 115-119). In effect, Halberstam argues for Sandy Stone's idea of "someness," a concept where a trans person need not stand in for all of the community, but instead only represents "some" of it (Halberstam *Trans** 116; Stone 232; "the word is *some*"). This balanced approach—that we still have more work to do—sounds a lot better to me than "isn't that sad?" and should be the focus in further adaptations.

Chapter Two

Gender on the Run

Criminality, Materiality, and Retrospectatorship

Introduction

If the previous era of trans representation in Hollywood depicts mostly medical success stories, I assert that the next era of popular films focuses on stories in which failure marked these characters as singular and dangerous. These trans characters often fail the medical system's totalizing norms of gender, and due to this, consequently fail other realms of “normal” life as depicted on the screen through "temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance" (Halberstam *Queer Time* 5). These queer/trans bodies then became unmoored from the typical narrative space film offers them as the "formative principal" (Bluestone 60-1), which casts them to the peripheries of stories (and the edges of the screen) where they are often depicted as a boogeyman figure. Norman Bates in 1960's *Psycho* stands out as the first example of this character type, but it is soon followed and developed heavily in the horror films of the 1970s, such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), and especially into the 1980s with both cheaply produced B-movie horror films like *Terror Train* (1980) and *Sleepaway Camp* (1983), and higher production suspense films like *Dressed To Kill* (1980); all of these depictions coalesce into the Oscar award winning film *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and the character of Buffalo Bill. The image of the road also emerges in these films, precisely because committing crimes—or being cast out of society for perceived crimes—often involves going on the run from authorities in some manner. Being a boogeyman in these films then links the road and the act of being on the run as a type of queer temporal embodiment, one which is then

developed and presented by the end of the 1990s in the film *Boys Don't Cry* and the various representations of Brandon Teena (Halberstam *Queer Time* 1-22). While these two trans characters do not seem to have anything in common on the surface, I argue that it is precisely their surfaces—be it the skin from the "woman suit" in *Silence* or the criminal charges and aliases Brandon Teena possesses—which links these two characters as trans adaptations from real life sources and through similar cinematic codes which become solidified in the 1990s. Unlike previous representations of the transsexual plotline from the 1970s, however, these depictions are distinguished through their failure of the medically established gendered norms and regulations, which then presents them as villains, monsters, criminals and other negative stereotypes. These normative temporal and spatial logics can be overcome through a revisiting of these films with a new cinematic audience and acts of rereading/reinterpreting, a practice that Patricia White dubs "retrospectatorship" (196-7). In other words, if trans representation is pushed to the edges of the screen during this era of filmmaking, it is possible to queer those very edges, and by doing so, reshape and reconfigure the normalizing message of the film itself, no matter the first intention or the producer's misunderstanding.

In this chapter, I take the trope of the trans person as monster/killer/criminal and use the two very specific representations of Buffalo Bill and Brandon Teena to investigate the ways in which criminality can lead to gender embodiment (especially when typical institutions fail these characters) and how these perceived gender failures can be elevated to a certain level of resistance through a queer reclaiming some audiences can do of certain representations and the limited space these trans characters take up on the screen. I do this through a rereading of Buffalo Bill as a transsexual woman with a possible "posthuman gender" (Halberstam *Skin Shows* 176); I also (re)view Buffalo Bill's woman suit as the embodiment of Jame Gumb's

transsexual plotline through Gayle Salmon's understanding of Jay Prosser's work on the skin as bodily ego. I link the urge to reread this character among certain trans and gender nonconforming groups as an aspect of an emerging counter-discourse (Stone 230) that was already beginning in the early 1990s due to previously held assumptions of trans criminality in earlier decades. By taking back the image of the monster retroactively, like trans woman Laura Jane Grace does with Buffalo Bill in her own creative output in 2015, the trans monster becomes a new kind of gender outlaw with an empowering sense of "transgender rage" (Stryker "My Words" 244).

In the last section of this chapter, I use the layered and numerous interpretations of Brandon Teena's life story to explore how his criminal acts can become a way of manifesting his materiality and identity, and how the numerous films about him have been adapted and understood (or misunderstood) over the years. I view Brandon's skin in a similar way to Buffalo Bill's skin, but shift from the materiality of the bodily ego to the ephemera of crimes that influence how the legal record reflect and reproduce Brandon's image of himself. Ultimately, I see this chapter as an act of counter-reading where I can mobilize certain images associated with transgender/transsexual people and—without excusing the cisgender society that created them—offer resistance to the totalizing norms that the former medical model and success stories once dictated.

The Reel Transsexual (Monster)

The Silence of the Lambs is a mystery/suspense novel written in 1988 by the author Thomas Harris. It is his third novel overall and the second in a series involving the cannibal/serial killer Hannibal Lecter. In both the novel and film of *The Silence of the Lambs*, the

main criminal to catch through a serial murder investigation is a person named Jame Gumb.⁷ Gumb has been murdering women after starving them for days in order to then skin parts of their body to make a "woman suit" for himself, since he has previously been rejected from John Hopkins gender clinic for gender affirmation (then called sex re-assignment and sex change) surgery (Harris 221). Jame Gumb is also known as Buffalo Bill, his serial killer moniker and press-assigned name; the title is a play on the former American Old West hero Buffalo Bill and is also a crude joke made by the police involved in investigating since they assume that the serial murderer "skins his humps" (Harris 42). The main investigator is Clarice Starling (played by Jody Foster in the film version), a Quantico trainee who wishes to demonstrate to her mentor how capable she is at solving this crime. She interviews Hannibal Lecter (played by Anthony Hopkins) in order to profile this new serial killer, since not only is Lecter a serial killer himself but he is also a former psychiatrist. Lecter spends most of the film (and novel) behind bars until his escape in the third act; Lecter also plays mind games with Clarice as she hunts down Buffalo Bill who, as Lecter points out in one of their conversations, is most likely a person seeking sex reassignment surgery, though Lecter insists that "Billy" is "not a transsexual" (221) or not a "true transsexual" (Harris 224). Eventually, Clarice finds the house where Jame Gumb lives. After a show-off in the basement where she is in the dark and he has night vision glasses, she kills him and saves his latest victim. The story ends with Clarice continuing her career at the FBI and Lecter informing her that he is still on the run. While there are sequels that deal with Clarice and Lecter's relationship, and a previous novel which contains another investigator named Will Graham and his relationship with Lecter, I will set these narratives aside and solely focus on the image and creation of Buffalo Bill in both the novel and the 1991 film by Jonathan Demme.

⁷For the ease of the reader, I refer to Gumb using his/he pronouns; I do this not to misgender the character, but to present a cogent reading which reflects how other scholars—Halberstam included—have referred to the character.

Similarly, I set aside the recent television show made by NBC called *Hannibal*, as I have already written extensively on that series and the possible queer and trans interpretations of those characters (see the References for these articles).

It is no overstatement that Buffalo Bill is most likely one of the most famous (or infamous) depictions of a trans person in media. Numerous scholars and writers have written about him as homophobic (Brovenman), transphobic (Serano 252-3), a product of the medicalized system (Truit), "gender performativity gone horribly awry" (Garber 116), deceptive stereotype (Ryan 54-65), and the epitome of trans-misogyny (Cavanaugh). In her assessment of transgender representation, Joelle Ruby Ryan defines the "transgender monster" trope as one which treats "gender diversity as a threatening form of criminality" and where the "transgender killer is the abject, the grotesque and the monstrous all rolled up into one" (54). She traces this gender deviant image to the real life case of Wisconsin murderer Ed Gein since his case was what inspired author Robert Bloch to pen *Psycho*, which would then be adapted into the first image of this trans/gender deviant killer in the character of Norman Bates (54-57).⁸ The tagline 'based on a true story' appears on some of the films in which this real life murder case inspired (such as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*), and there are numerous accounts of Thomas Harris visiting Quantico for research on his novels and coming across the file of Ed Gein (Douglas 365-66). Harris also borrowed from the real life cases of Ted Bundy and Gary M. Heidnik, two serial killers who also inspired Buffalo Bill through the cast on his arm (Bundy) and the hole he keeps women trapped inside (Heidnik) (Douglas 364-400). Moreover, the criminal profiler John E. Douglas visited the set of *The Silence of the Lambs* to consult for the film; while there he played a real-life tape of the "Tool Box Killers" to the actor Scott Glenn who plays Clarice's mentor in

⁸ see also my chapter called "Gender/Animal Suits: Adapting Buffalo Bill from *The Silence of the Lambs* to NBC's *Hannibal*" in *Hannibal Lecter and the Fannibals, Criminals, and Legacy of America's Favorite Cannibal* edited by Kyle Moody and Nicholas Yanes for more on Gein's history.

the film (see John Douglas's *Obsession*; also Power). I bring up the legacy of the FBI, criminal profiling, and the killers who inspired Buffalo Bill in order to demonstrate how, even if there is no explicit claim that *The Silence of the Lambs* is true, there is enough which "passes as authentic" (Park 478) for the audience watching it, and re-watching it, in subsequent years. Due to the immense popularity and critical success of the film, and its attention to real-life details (no matter how misunderstood from Gein's case file), Buffalo Bill becomes stuck in the popular culture's imagination and his impact continues to linger. Even if, as Joelle Ruby Ryan notes, trans people are far more likely to be victims of violent crimes than to become serial killers themselves, the culture is still pulled towards this image of gender deviance and monstrosity as expressed in the "she-male psychopath" (Ryan 178-9).

It is very easy to read Buffalo Bill's image as nothing but bad, negative, and completely regressive. There is a reason why Queer Nation protested outside the 1992 Oscars (Brovenman), and why Joelle Ruby Ryan uses Buffalo Bill as the main example of the "she-male psychopath" in her work. Overall, the monster trope emerges in these films as a way to assert the norm, since each one of these films often ends with the death of the deviant killer. The trans criminal is a sacrificial lamb for the normative and totalizing social order, and no film makes that clearer than *The Silence of The Lambs*. There are a lot of reasons to be upset about Buffalo Bill; I am not discounting any of these readings. Yet I return to the story of Buffalo Bill, and the trans monster trope, in order to demonstrate a historical lineage of images associated with trans people (and consequently, a cisgender audience's desire to return to that original entry, and the cultural boogeyman it sparks, to paraphrase Carroll [*Adaptation* 1]) and highlight its fraught connection to the medical model of transsexual identity and materiality.

When Hannibal Lecter states to Clarice that Jame Gumb is "not a transsexual" (219), he becomes a doctor figure and gatekeeper from another era. Hannibal Lecter is Harry Benjamin in a nicer suit; a doctor who says he is there to help, yet he literally devours his patients. Lecter's cannibalism can easily be read as the way in which doctors like Benjamin became celebrities by cashing in on the stories of their trans patients while telling them to deny or silence their past (such as in Joanna's story, and through the fictitious creation of Leo Wollman in *Let Me Die A Woman*). As Jack Halberstam notes, Lecter is all mind while Gumb is "all body" (*Skin Shows* 164); they are completely different ideologies, binaries, and perceptions, and though they never meet face-to-face on the screen, they battle through the body of Clarice Starling. These tensions are most pronounced in the final basement scene. In this show-down, where Clarice is utterly in the dark and only Gumb has the night vision goggles, it seems like it will be impossible for her to prevail. But since *The Silence of the Lambs* is a mainstream film, one which borrows extensively from the real life case of Ed Gein, one that utilizes the rather conservative genre of the mystery/horror, and one which has been influenced by the film trope of the final girl (Clover 50-56), there is no doubt that Clarice will win. Therefore, Buffalo Bill becomes a prop in the recreation and reassertion of the patriarchal and hegemonic norms (Ryan 180). In addition, when Lecter eludes police, it is yet another confirmation of the possible transphobic reading of the film: the "right" doctor and the "right" criminal gets away; Lecter may cannibalize people, but Lecter is allowed to remain the anti-hero in the film (and for the rest of the series), while Gumb is gone, and must therefore pay for all his gender transgressions with his life. On the surface, there seems to be no redeeming feature of Buffalo Bill. This is precisely why this image has been criticized so heavily, and why I believe Bryan Fuller never developed the character in the NBC television show. Like so many representations from the late 1980s and 1990s, the politics and

social understandings of trans people were different than they are today, and so to adapt Buffalo Bill now and not make any changes to his character would not hold up to current pop cultural and critical understandings of trans people in real life. Buffalo Bill is, no question, problematic in many ways.

But Buffalo Bill/Jame Gumb also synthesizes a unique frustration often experienced (and written about) by trans people, in particular trans women, within the medical institution where their gender identity and presentation is highly policed and sometimes outright rejected. Julia Serano (*Whipping* 250-255), Kate Bornstein (60-66), Sandy Stone (225-230), and Viviane Namaste (157-235) are some of the numerous trans writers and scholars who have discussed the sometimes coercive and deeply stereotypical roles trans people have been asked to—or forced to—play in order to receive the medical treatment they desire. The distinction between the "true" transsexual and the "fake" transsexual continues today in the diagnostic language of Transvestic Disorder, and specifically around the label of autogynephilia (Serano *Outspoken* 157-167).⁹ Autogynephilia posits that certain trans women do not desire being women per se, but rather, desire themselves as an idealized feminine version. Ray Blanchard, who is most well-known for popularizing this term, effectively conflates sexuality and gender identity, especially with trans women who also love and have relationships with women.

Trans critic Jos Truit also sees this conflation with Buffalo Bill's representation. In an article for *Feministing*, Truit writes that as

the film goes on, Bill's actions make it clear that she was not diagnosed as a "true" transsexual because she's in the category of autogynephile. This includes making a woman suit, an act of fetishizing the idea of having a female body.

Hannibal tells Clarice the key to Bill's pathology is to look at what he "covets:"

⁹ See Julia Serano's work *Outspoken* for a full recap of this debate; I will also discuss it in more depth in Chapter 4.

the female body. The biggest confirmation, though, comes when Bill dances in front of a mirror to Goodbye Horses, wearing the scalp of one of her victims and a women's robe that she removes to reveal her nude body, tattoos loaded with transformational symbolism, and finally that she has tucked her penis between her legs, the ultimate visualization – even more than the skin suit – of her perversion. “Would you fuck me?” Bill asks her reflection. “I’d fuck me. I’d fuck me hard. I’d fuck me so hard.” The text of the film actively paints Bill as an autogynophile, sexually aroused by the idea of herself as a woman, one of the key reasons she was rejected by gatekeepers when trying to access medical transition. And, it seems, one of those gatekeepers was Hannibal Lecter – can you even imagine?

Imagine is exactly what I want to do—and keep doing—for the rest of this section. To view Gumb from the trans-centered perspective that Truit uses means that Gumb's experience in the medical system is not unique, not a personal failure, but rather common due to this conflation and fundamental misunderstanding of what being trans means inside this "pathological science" (Serano *Outspoken* 159). Gumb's depiction can stand-in as a critique of that system and a subsequent catharsis or relief, even if that was not the intention of Thomas Harris or Jonathan Demme. Indeed, while this particular adaptation of the transsexual plotline falls in line with so many of the previously established filmic tropes I discussed in the previous chapter, precisely because Jame Gumb fails under this cisgender scopophilic gaze (which is then turned around and directed back at himself and used as the reason why he fails), I assert that his failure can then be seen as a point of resistance. He fails the medical system, but the medical system does not understand who or what a trans person really is or could be (Truit). By failing, Gumb also resists the normative logics of "community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and

time" which allow him to then inhabit a queer time and place at the edges of the film (Halberstam *Queer Time* 5). These edges do not mean he is a totally and unredeemable monster anymore, but that he can be reworked inside a different cinematic code where ideas of "bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance" (Halberstam *Queer Time* 5) are all now redefined through what Patricia White calls "retrospectatorship" (97).

As I stated in the introduction, I view Patricia White's concept of retrospectatorship as an act of looking backwards towards the past cinematic image with the cogent knowledge of current representability (and with the additional knowledge that the "now" of the current may shift and change with each audience member). For Rachel Carroll's understanding of White's term, retrospectating a film means understanding both unconscious and conscious influences on the way in which the original viewing was experienced, which like all forms of spectatorship, "engages [the viewer in] subjective fantasy, revises memory traces and experience[s]" (*Adaptation* 43). Therefore, retrospectatorship

offers a valuable framework within which to conceptualize repetition, as a mode of cultural experience, and its relation to memory and affect; premised on an acknowledgement of affective investment, it might be adapted to contribute to a rethinking of fidelity as something other than a critically suspect sentiment.

(*Adaptation* 43).

What White (and Carroll through White) does here is to then validate the emotions which arise from a particular viewing experience—and a particular adaptation experience—and each author does this by locating these emotions in a temporal and queerer context. Even if emotions and fidelity in adaptations studies are now seen as imprecise (Slethaug *Adaptation* 15-19), emotions and affect need not be shoved aside in scholarship; emotions should be contextualized, and

then re-contextualized once again through acts of viewing in time and space. In effect, in the same way that the "formative principles" (60) of the book and screen are different in adaptation studies according to Bluestone, as is the viewing experience in time and space. The first viewing of a film like *The Silence of the Lambs* might spark outrage due to Buffalo Bill transmisogyny; or it might cause pride because some aspects of Buffalo Bill's queerness and "posthuman gender" (Halberstam *Skin Shows* 176) might be relatable to an un-acknowledged trans viewer; or it may cause no emotion at all. Similarly, emotions may become stronger with repeated viewings, or particular audience members may blur the memory of the event, or the culture's memory of the event with the audience's memory of this event (much like how real-life Ed Gein is represented through the skin suit, but then Gein's own discomfort of his gender is obscured and often misrepresented in history [see K.E. Sullivan for more on this misrepresentation of Gein's motives]). Retrospectatorship offers a unique way in which to view the process of adaptation as continually repeating a storyline or trope in order to produce a desired outcome, but it also offers a way of understanding the emotions that these repeated tropes spark in the audience through their own repeated viewings. Rather than leaving these emotions behind, Carroll and White both use affect and adaptation to understand a particular representation's cultural hold.

To then view *The Silence of the Lambs* in this methodology means the audience can then look back on the image of Buffalo Bill and embrace him as who he longs to be: a transsexual woman. This is what Truit argues for in her article, and it seems to be exactly what trans singer Laura Jane Grace intends to do when she re-uses an image of Buffalo Bill from the film for her single "True Trans" and its accompanying EP. The cover image is a screen shot of Buffalo Bill clearly from the infamous dancing scene, but Grace has turned it into a grainy, black-and-white image, with the bold and capitalized words TRUE TRANS underneath. The words act as the title

for her single, but also a call-out to Blanchard's "pathological science" which insists that women like Buffalo Bill are fake (Serano *Outspoken* 159). What becomes true in Grace's depiction is not Buffalo Bill's story of an autogynephilic patient, or the former tale of Ed Gein and the boogeyman of gender, but the transsexual plotline that the medical institution has rejected, and so, Bill did it alone.

Grace's use of the transgender monster image in this manner also links her to Susan Stryker's 1993 essay "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix." With this essay, Stryker becomes part of Sandy Stone's call for a "counterdiscourse" (244) within trans studies and the trans community; Stryker also uses the essay as a way to take back the power and agency from the larger transphobic world, along with doctors who have mislabel trans people's experiences, and the broader LGB community who do not always acknowledge trans people and their embodiment (244-5). Stryker acknowledges that the transsexual body is an "unnatural body" one made by science and technology, and due to that, she feels a great "affinity" with Frankenstein's monster (245). While these associations with trans monstrosity in the past have been problematic and hurtful, the trans monster need not be seen as something wholly damaging. Instead Stryker wishes

to lay claim to the dark power of my monstrous identity without using it as a weapon against others or being wounded by it myself. I will say this as bluntly as I know how: I am a transsexual, and therefore I am a monster. Just as the words "dyke," "fag," "queer," "slut," and "whore" have been reclaimed, respectively, by lesbians and gay men, by anti-assimilationist sexual minorities, by women who pursue erotic pleasure, and by sex industry workers, words like "creature," "monster," and "unnatural" need to be reclaimed by the transgendered. By

embracing and accepting them, even piling one on top of another, we may dispel their ability to harm us. (246).

Stryker's image of "piling" —names atop names, an utter deluge of signification—can certainly be applied to Buffalo Bill. Jame Gumb has numerous names: the serial killer moniker which turns him into a monster, but also his birth name that was misrepresented and miswritten on his birth certificate (Harris 183). There are also the diagnoses he gets in the film ("not a real transsexual") *and* outside of the film through audience readings and re-readings of his possible significations (transmisogyny, deceptive, etc). This piling of names *and* the subsequent skins from his victims become fused together in a visual creation which literally makes him into a patchwork of postmodern identity (Halberstam *Skin Shows* 176). Indeed, one of the main critiques of Buffalo Bill is that his gender is all surface identity; it is literally a skin that is draped over himself, and because of this, Marjorie Garber (among others) has stated that it is as if he is gender performativity run amok (116). Yet this surface identity can be Buffalo Bill—or Jame Gumb's—best expression of his gendered sense of self.

In *Assuming A Body*, Gayle Salmon develops Jay Prosser's and Didier Anzieu's work on the bodily skin ego in order to understand and validate a trans person's felt sense of self and their striving for materiality of that gendered self. The skin becomes a way into understanding and maintaining materiality since Salmon (and Anzieu) acknowledge that skin functions "to maintain, contain, and protect the self [... it acts] as a screen between self and world [and lends] coherence to the self" (43). These writers then use surface artefact as a way into these discussions on materiality and gender identity, rather than using the surface and artefact as a way to disregard the reality of transgender/transsexual experience, echoing what Halberstam did with his work *Skin Shows* years earlier. In this framework, gender identity in *The Silence of the Lambs*

becomes "a kind of literal skin dis-ease but all the other characters in the film are similarly, although not necessarily pathologically, discomforted" (Halberstam *Skin Shows* 165). Each character's discomfort in the novel is depicted through oscillating perspectives, from Clarice to Lecter to Buffalo Bill and back again, where their character's skin helps to keep a lid on their thoughts; each character's unique perspective and point-of-view prevents their interior pain from leaking outwards, so to speak. When the chapter starts with Clarice, it stays there until the end of the chapter or section; there is no fusion with anyone else.¹⁰ When adapted to the screen, however, everyone's interior discomfort now becomes projected onto the "skin is also the movie screen, the destination of the gaze" (Halberstam *Skin Shows* 165). It is precisely this gaze which is so often scopophilic to trans people, which then through the adaptation process turns Buffalo Bill into yet another iteration of the reveal trope as discussed in the previous chapter (see also figure 7). Yet it is this mirror which is also the screen where Bill sees himself as he wishes to see himself, and it is this image of Buffalo Bill in the mirror that Laura Jane Grace takes back and re-appropriates for her own work. While the mirror scene in *The Silence of the Lambs* is now played for laughs in other forms of media (Truit; see also *Clerks II*), the mirror is a popular trope within trans memoirs and its presence marks a distinctly trans way in which Jame Gumb can access his interiority (Prosser 101-3). When the mirror image is then reworked through this trans-perspective, a feeling of "true trans" (as Grace has put it) emerges: a place where Gumb feels and sees his gender through the screen of his body and the former skin of others.

¹⁰In genre writing terms, Harris does not use 'head hopping' in his novel; he picks a character per scene/chapter and inhabits their viewpoint from a limited third-person perspective, rather than a wholly omniscient one. This is a frequent tactic in genre fiction, but it has a uniquely postmodern feel to it with this work since no omniscience means that each character's perspective, in some way or another, remains equal or 'true' as long as the reader is inside of it.



Figure 7: Jame Gumb/Buffalo Bill from the famous mirror scene in *The Silence of the Lambs*.

Credit: Orion Video.

There are also several other scenes of Jame Gumb in the novel which were cut, most likely for the sake of run time, where Gumb watches old footage of his mother and clearly uses these as a form of gender embodiment. I quote them at length to get a sense of the way in which Harris uses the third-person perspective from a distinctly character-driven viewpoint, and also to set the scene, so to speak:

Mr. Gumb had just washed his hair and he had a towel wrapped around his head. He rummaged in the sheets, found the remote control for his VCR, and pushed the play button. He had composed his program from two pieces of videotape copied onto one cassette. He watched it every day when he was making vital preparations, and he always watched it just before he harvested a hide. The first tape was from scratchy film of Movietone News, a black-and-white newsreel from 1948. It was the quarter-finals of the Miss Sacramento contest, a preliminary

event on the long road to the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City. This was the swimsuit competition, and all the girls carried flowers as they came in a file to the stairs and mounted to the stage

[...]The beauty contestants looked very World War II. They wore Rose Marie Reid swimsuits, and some of the faces were lovely. Their legs were nicely shaped too, some of them, but they lacked muscle tone and seemed to lap a little at the knee. [...]And here she came, approaching the stairs in her white swimsuit, with a radiant smile for the young man who assisted at the stairs, then quick on her high heels away, the camera following the backs of her thighs: Mom. There was Mom. Mr. Gumb didn't have to touch his remote control, he'd done it all when he dubbed this copy. In reverse, here she came backward, backward down the stairs, took back her smile from the young man, backed up the aisle, now forward again, and back and forward, forward and back. When she smiled at the young man, Gumb smiled too. There was one more shot of her in a group, but it always blurred in freeze-frame. (Harris 361-363).

In a subsequent section, Gumb watches another videotape of his mother so much that "[t]ears blurred Jame Gumb's vision as though he were in the pool himself" with her (Harris 430). When these scenes are also viewed (or perhaps stitched) together with the film version of Buffalo Bill, a more developed sense of his gender emerges. While it may be easy to criticize Harris's armchair-Freudian interpretations of Gumb's motivations, I wish to suggest that Gumb's viewing practices can be a form of retrospectatorship. In these scenes, Gumb is no longer an autogynephilic trans woman seeking an idealized feminine version of himself, but seeking a source/origin of his own gender dysphoria in hopes of alleviating it by embodying it. By re-

watching and reviewing these old tapes, he returns to a "subjective fantasy [that] revises memory traces" of a previous experience, allowing for "[c]ultural texts 'outside' the subject participate in th[e] structuring [of the film]" in order to derive new meaning (Carroll *Adaptation* 43-44; White 196-197). This connection to retrospectatorship is made even more cogent when Jorgensen's history is considered alongside Gumb's actions. The WWII era beauty queens completely echo Jorgensen's look as she stepped off the plane in 1952, and Gumb's watching and re-watching until "he were in the pool himself" (Harris 430) aligns him with his mother, but also those previous iterations of WWII era beauties. The movie screen becomes a place to project Gumb's gender journey—all without moving. Since Gumb does not travel for a doctor (and has actively been rejected by a doctor), he travels through screens and future projections: his skin to the skin of other women; the television images of himself as fugitive/criminal Buffalo Bill to his first ideals of femininity through the beauty queens and his mother; and the deathhead moth's wings that he puts in one of the victim's throat. Gumb may be static or still most of the film—he even pretends to have a mobility issue in order to attain one of the victims, and dies trapped in a dark basement with literally no way out—but the serial killer name he is given imbues him with a sense of freedom and mobility that he cannot have in real life. In spite of the horrific crimes, it is hard not to imagine Buffalo Bill the serial killer as a cowboy discovering the West, taking it over, and being part of the uniquely mythic American landscape.

Since Jame Gumb will never get to travel in an overseas vacation like numerous memoirs established in the past, and he will not survive his ordeal, it is the viewers of Buffalo Bill who need to complete the journey for him. They can do this through understanding his gender through the surface materiality of names and skins, but also through this common travel narrative. To do all of this reading and re-reading, however, demands an active and informed stance from the

audience, something of which was not wholly available in the early 1990s. As Halberstam writes, “transsexuality [was] an exotic phenomenon for which the public was not ready. The mainstream media represented transgender people as 'dysphoric,' dishonest, disoriented, or worse, and this sense of disorientation, rather than being folded into a general postmodern condition, was cast as uninhabitable and pathologically unstable” (*Trans** 114). This is sense of being uninhabitable—or uncontained as Stryker might say (“My Words” 249)—was Buffalo Bill's downfall back in the early 1990s, but now it can be the source of his power and "transgender rage" which people like Grace and Stryker inhabit when they reread this monster character archetype through the lens of damaging medical associations (Stryker “My Words” 244-250). Bill's piling on top of skins, stitching them together, and then wearing them proudly in the famous mirror scene can then be viewed as a triumph of this postmodern condition, gender identity and performativity, *along with* materiality and embodiment. While Buffalo Bill's “misidentity forced him to assume what we might call a posthuman gender” Buffalo Bill also manages to divorce “once and for all sex and gender or nature and gender and remakes the human condition as a posthuman body suit” and it is a human condition where “gender is always posthuman, always a sewing job which stitches identity into a body bag” (Halberstam *Skin Shows* 176). Halberstam goes so far as to state that Buffalo Bill can stand in for “humanness” because gender identity “is not the transcendent signifier of humanity, [but rather] it is its most efficient technology” (*Skin Shows* 177). By calling gender a technology, Halberstam raises the surgeries which facilitate it as a form of art, since technology as a word is derived from the word *techne* meaning 'speech art' in Greek (Ong 9). Buffalo Bill's monstrosity need not be monstrous at all, but his precise point of power in the postmodern landscape, and his eventual way of rising up "from the operating tables of our rebirth" (Stryker 248).

Ultimately I think that all of these interpretations and reinterpretations of Buffalo Bill on the screen point to a need to “affirm a materiality—or, to be less abstract, to insist on the livability of one’s own embodiment, particularly when that embodiment is culturally abject or socially despised” (Salman 91). The difficulty in all of this is, especially for Buffalo Bill and those who reuse his image, is that to do so means to “undertake a constant and always incomplete labor to reconfigure more than just the materiality of our own bodies. It is to strive to create and transform the lived meanings of those materialities” (Salman 91). In Jame Gumb’s case, like many of the other trans monster trope characters from this era, he ends up dead at the end of the story; gender transgressions are punished and all normalizing and totalizing forces of heteronormativity and patriarchy are set back into place by the time the credits roll (Ryan 180). As a monster, Buffalo Bill’s creation—like the root word of the term “monster”—may be there to warn (Stryker “My Words” 247), but ultimately, Buffalo Bill does not get to speak in his full voice on the screen; he is relegated to the edges, the periphery, to a queer time and place until he is picked up by those in the audience and reworked for a different use.

I do not wish to completely disregard the monster image and its transformative powers, however; I only wish to point out that by the end of the 1990s, the monster character type had transformed in numerous mainstream films into the queer time and place of the gender outlaw (Halberstam *Queer Time* 47-77). Like Stryker’s essay, which sought to give voice back to trans people within these totalizing discourses in order to rise up from them (“My Words” 248), the term “gender outlaw” was utilized by numerous trans authors in the 1990s as another way to represent the coercive measures of the hegemonic culture (Bornstein 1). In Kate Bornstein’s memoir, she reconfigures the monster by reworking the image of the Lone Ranger and criminality. She writes that she

used to watch *The Lone Ranger* on television. I loved that show. This masked guy rides into town on a horse, does all these great and heroic deeds, everyone falls in love with him and he leaves. He never takes off his mask, no one ever sees his face. He leaves behind a silver bullet and the memory of someone who can do no wrong. No bad rumors, no feet of clay, no cellulite. What a life! There's a self-help book out there somewhere. Who was that Masked Man? Learning to Overcome the Lone Ranger Syndrome. (58).

Her quip about 'lone ranger syndrome' is meant to be jovial, but there is also a serious link to the criminal aspect of *The Lone Ranger* since he is masked; even if he does good deeds, the very lack of identity infers criminality and subsequent monstrosity (Taussig 117-125). Similarly, Buffalo Bill is a criminal because he has done wrong, not just through acts of murder but also through his failure of gender and the mask of skin he assumes. Rather than internalizing this monstrous identity, however, Bornstein externalizes the trope through her television habits of *The Lone Ranger* (much like Buffalo Bill does in the novel version). So, rather than becoming a monster and taking in the language of pathology, Bornstein externalizes the image to the criminal on the road, on the run: that of someone evading the law by existing at the edges (rather than being pushed to the edges through institutional force). The difference is subtle, but important, and it is also demonstrated through the materiality of names and skins. By draping over a cloth mask and donning a criminal outfit, *The Lone Ranger's* disguise becomes much like the materiality of skin that Bill also drapes over himself, and much like the names and monikers that Stryker piles in order to take back her own identity ("My Words" 246). The mask for the *Lone Ranger* is also worn to maintain the sense of self; to hide from the social order, not to become what the social order claimed one to be. The gender outlaw is then someone who does

not fit into the typical mold of male/female as defined by a larger cultural narrative. As Leslie Feinberg describes in his book *Transgender Liberation* the gender outlaws are the "transvestites, transsexuals, drag queens and kings, cross-dressers, bull-daggers, stone butches, adrongynes, diesel dykes or berdache" and otherwise unaccounted for in hegemonic cultural ideas of gender norms (206). Both Feinberg and Bornstein, like all gender outlaws, end up existing outside of the totalizing forces of medicalization and institutional control, as well as prototypical "organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" (Halberstam *Queer Time* 5). More often than not their official documents which demand sex identification (such as licenses, passports, or other documents) do not match and so, like the Lone Ranger, they are not entered into the public order.

Yet to be matched is not the goal of the gender outlaw. They may exist outside of these recognitions, but they revel in this mismatched identity in their writings. These authors use the mask not to conform, but to keep their very sense of selves as mismatched intact; to be mismatched *is* the gender they wish to embody, rather than an obstacle to embodiment. Instead of a monster, Feinberg, Bornstein, and numerous other trans writers, artists, and activists have transformed themselves into gender *failures*, a term that expresses the same type of "transgender rage" that Stryker speaks of so eloquently at the beginning of the 1990s ("My Words" 252-3), but which has now evolved through trans writers and artists like Rae Spoon and Ivan Coyote in their own memoir *Gender Failure* when they recognize that "being a girl was something that never really happened for me" (27), making them both "girl failure[s]" and gender failures overall.

Moreover, when Bornstein is mismatched, she is a Lone Ranger-like hero, a drifter who comes in and saves the day, and then walks out again. Instead of taking possible rejection as a

stop to her gender journey, she ascribes new meaning to her travel narrative by turning herself into a drifter outlaw. To be a gender outlaw or gender failure is to not fit within standard gender *and* to also never stay in the same place, thus combining and re-inscribing the typical travel narrative as one that does not require a homecoming in body or landscape. The gender outlaw is then someone who delights in the in-between; they inhabit the haptic, the becoming, the trans* narrative that Halberstam defines in his work, and writes about extensively in his own film selections over the course of his academic career (*Trans** 107). I will return to this version of the gender outlaw more in the next chapter when discussing the road film. For now, though, I want to evoke and keep in mind the outsider status that Bornstein adopts through the Lone Ranger, and the way in which she uses it as a tool for resistance *through* criminality and being outside the law, and I wish to link this construction to the real life story of Brandon Teena and how his image has been interpreted and reinterpreted (and retrospectated) throughout the 1990s.

Gender Failure

In December 1993, John Lotter and Tom Nissen broke into Lisa Lambert's house in Falls City, Nebraska where they shot and killed Philip Devine, Lisa Lambert, and Brandon Teena, leaving an eighteen month old infant unharmed. Brandon Teena was said to be the target from the start; he was dating Lotter's ex Lana Tisdell and had a criminal record for forgery, theft, and fraud. He also presented himself as a man, though he had been born Teena Brandon and declared female at birth. The triple murder was instantly picked up by national news media and written about in a true-crime tell-all nonfiction work by Aphrodite Jones called *All She Wanted* (sometimes stylized as *All (S)he Wanted*) and made into a 1998 documentary *The Brandon Teena Story*. The real life story, in addition to these other interpretations, would become the basis for

the award winning 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry*. While none of these adaptations doubts the brutality of Brandon Teena's death nor the guilt of Tom Nissen and John Lotter, there have been extreme divides within the LGBTQ community on how to interpret Teena's sexuality, gender, and criminality. As Jack Halberstam remarks, the film *Boys Don't Cry* and the media images around it "made Brandon Teena into a cultural hero, a martyr, and a victim" (*Trans** 115) and it is this precise inability to locate who Brandon Teena was on which this last half of the chapter will focus. I'd like to examine the confusion surrounding his identity, while also making an interpretative claim in a similar way that I did with Buffalo Bill. To some audiences, Buffalo Bill is a trans-misogynistic construction, while to others he can be a point of resistance, reinterpretation, and retrospectorship, depending on how the surface artefacts (such as skin) and production of those artefacts are viewed through film adaptation theory. Brandon Teena, like Buffalo Bill, is based on a true story but with a stronger connection to the case it is said to be inspired by; even with this stronger sense of voice, Brandon's story also becomes fractured when picked up and reinterpreted by numerous communities with their own insights and perspectives about what his life meant. Without a standard memoir on which to draw upon as a source text, Brandon's voice becomes lost in these (re)interpretative acts by other groups. After giving a brief historical summary of what occurred before, during, and after the production of numerous materials about Brandon Teena, I'd ultimately like to re-examine the materials that he left behind—such as criminal charges—as the same type of bodily skin-ego and gender materiality which can then give another reading of how Brandon might have seen himself. I give this reading as another act of retrospectorship, a way to look back at the conscious and unconscious memory traces in order to reinterpret his cinematic image in a new light, while also

acknowledging that everyone knows very little "about what [Brandon] actually thought or did" (Cvetkovich 277).

Early on in the 1998 documentary *The Brandon Teena Story*, an image of Brandon dressed as a gangster comes across the screen (see figure 8). The image is contrasted with the police image used for announcing his murder (see figure 9), which is then followed up with the other two victims at the residence in Nebraska, Philip Devine and Lisa Lambert. The contrast between these two images of Brandon—one as victim, the other as criminal—has marked the interpretations and adaptations of the Brandon Teena story since it first broke into mainstream media. The opening of *The Brandon Teena* story also contains many of his previous girlfriends, most of whom were straight, discussing their relationship. "If Brandon really was a man [...] he would have women after him all the time," his ex-girlfriend Daphne remarks, and follows up with: "He knew how to do everything right." Most of the people in the film seem unable to articulate how Brandon identified himself, a fact of which his death only renders even more unclear. In Aphrodite Jones's true crime book *All (S)he Wanted*, Jones's pronoun usage for Brandon is fractured and indeterminate; most of the book Brandon is referred to as she/her, while occasional instances refer to Brandon in masculine pronouns while discussing his "gender identity crisis" (82). In addition, Brandon's gravestone has his birth name and describes him as a "daughter, sister, and friend." The 1999 film version of *Boys Don't Cry* offers another fractured depiction of Brandon, so fractured that when Hilary Swank won the Oscar for portraying him, she referred to him in male pronouns and drew connections to the transgender community, something that, as Jean Bobby Noble documents, she would later apologize to Brandon's family for after accepting her award (145-6).



Figure 8: The opening sequence of *The Brandon Teena Story* with personal photo of Brandon as a gangster

Credit: screenshot taken by author (SMA Distribution).

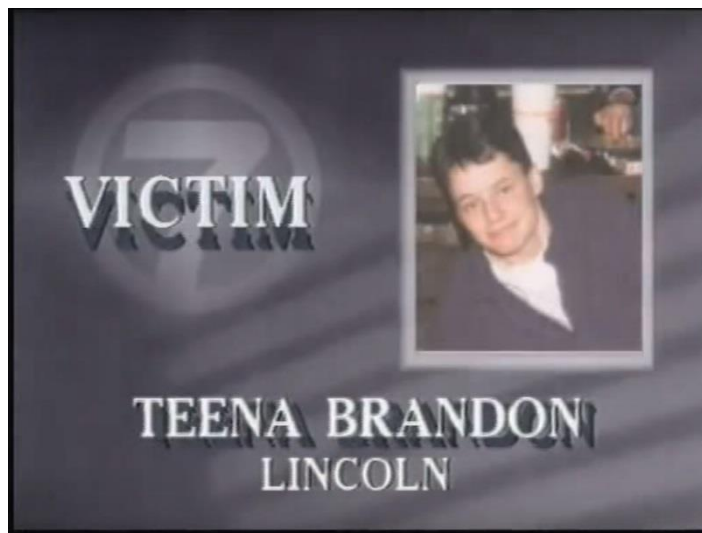


Figure 9: Police image used to announce the murder of Brandon Teena

Credit: Screenshot taken by author from *The Brandon Teena Story* (SMA Distribution).

As queer studies scholar Ann Cvetkovich notes, "Teena's story is quite remarkable, [since it marks] a notable instance in which a queer trauma story has reached the national public sphere" (274). The mourning and grief that has come from Brandon's death, however, has also caused a number of "turf wars" (Cvetkovich 275) or "border wars" (Noble 43) on who gets to claim Brandon "particularly around the question of whether to read him as transgendered or lesbian" (Cvetkovich 275). When Donna Minkowitz wrote about Teena's death in her article for

the *Village Voice*, she interpreted Brandon as a lesbian and drew ire from the trans community for her portrayal, something of which both Cvetkovich and Jean Bobby Noble have documented extensively (Cvetkovich 275; Noble xxx). Even *The Brandon Teena Story* documentary, though it stakes no official 'side' in this war, documents the rising trans activist movement when it shows Kate Bornstein outside the courtroom during Lotter and Nissen's trial (Cvetkovich 275). What Noble in particular finds so

profoundly disturbing about the border war that has erupted over Brandon Teena is its insistent and compulsory singularity, indeterminacy, and need for possession. Not only is Brandon misrepresented as something he seemed not to be, but his lovers – young, working-class white women who have clearly and articulately named themselves – are also misrepresented and characterized as self-hating closeted lesbians or “duped” heterosexual girls. By constructing the border war between two camps (butches and FTMs) as being solely over gender (specifically, masculinity in No Man’s Land), such arguments must either ignore or repudiate other sites of contest – in this case, contests of meaning between lesbian identified femmes and the, for all intents and purposes, heterosexual, working-class women who were Brandon’s lovers and who have been delegated to the sidelines throughout the press coverage. (xxx)

I quote this section at length because it highlights the exact stakes in the matter of Brandon's interpretation for both sexual and gender minorities and the (assumed cisgender) majority of the women with whom he was in relationships. If Brandon Teena becomes adapted and interpreted as a butch lesbian, then Brandon's death becomes another homophobic murder at the hands of small-town, closed-minded, rural Nebraska locals, similar to the later murder of the gay man

Matthew Shepard in Wyoming, which adds more validity to adding social protections for gay minorities in legislature (and another touchstone in popular culture, as Matthew's story would also be adapted into a play and then a film called *The Laramie Project*). Moreover, if Brandon is a butch lesbian, there is more public visibility for a marginalized community that is sometimes described as "disappearing" (Moody). The same social and political reasons also motivate interpreting his identity as a transgender man along with reading him as a transsexual man. It is important to note that both Kate Bornstein and trans activist Riki Wilchins attended the trial (Jones 290-3); their presence in the crowd not only marks Brandon as possibly on the "trans" side in this interpretative border war, but it also highlights a possible divide within this group since Bornstein's presence aligns with the gender outlaw term I've discussed earlier, while Riki Wilchins' presence aligns her with the activist group "Transsexual [sic] Menace" she created shortly after the trial/funeral (Jones 290-3). The use of transsexual (or transexual as Wilchins spells it) is a deliberate term, one that Wilchins acknowledges in the 2010s is no longer used as much within the activist community, but one which nonetheless contains a history that is both personal for Wilchins and cultural (see her article in the References for more). In other words, it is very possible to see yet another border in the debate around Brandon Teena: the urge to read him as a transgender person who rejects the medical system which can then cast him as a gender outlaw among Feinberg's list of other outlaws (*Liberation* 206); or he is a transsexual man who wished to take part in medical care—but like Buffalo Bill—was rejected through institutional failures and biases. The reading of Brandon Teena's body, his life, and his image then becomes tangled in another form of retrospectorship depending on who is viewing the story, and then who reinterprets it later on.

The issue of reading Brandon as lesbian vs. transgender vs. transsexual is especially salient in the film adaption (and the critical reception) of *Boys Don't Cry*. In the Kim Peirce film, the story can be seen as far less about Brandon's (possible) FTM transition and more about Brandon's trauma at the hands of others. In this manner, Peirce's depiction is not unlike Aphrodite Jones' of Brandon in *All (S)he Wanted* which also focuses on trauma, in addition to Brandon's personal relationships with others. For instance, in Jones's work, whenever Brandon has interactions with doctors, therapists, or even the legal system about his gender identity, it seems to be shifted towards discussing the childhood sexual abuse he experienced (61-64; 86). In one telling passage, Brandon's mother JoAnn was invited to attend Brandon's therapy session "and she went, expecting a lesson in transsexuals. Instead, the very first time the three of them sat down together, Teena brought up the business of being molested" (86). *All (S)he Wanted* also focuses more on Brandon's relationship with women than his relationship to his gender; he appears as either Billy or Brandon, a young man who seems "too good to be true" (Jones 317) to numerous heterosexual women, including Lisa Lambert and Lana Tisdell; these two women also appear as characters in *Boys Don't Cry*, where Brandon's relationship to Lana is the focal point of the film, and is far more ambiguous in terms of queer sexuality. In one of the first love scenes with Lana, she catches a glimpse of Brandon's bound chest and stays silent about it. While the depictions of Brandon's bound chest in the film mimic similar "big reveal" (Connelly 97) moments from earlier trans cinema (figure 10), Lana's glimpse of his chest does not necessarily reveal his trans identity to the audience since these previous cinematic codes were solidified with images of trans women on the screen. Moreover, since many butch lesbians also bind their chest, Lana acceptance and subsequent relationship with Brandon could be (and has been) interpreted as butch/femme (Cvetkovich 276).



Figure 10: Brandon Teena's reveal scene in *Boys Don't Cry*

Credit: Fox Video.

In both *All (S)he Wanted* and *Boys Don't Cry*, Brandon's identity flips back and forth between man, woman, and that of “hermaphrodite” with a “gender identity crisis” (Jones 82) without really staking a solid claim. Though Jones seems to side more with interpreting Brandon as transsexual (since it seems to offer the best explanation as to why Brandon was targeted for a crime that night), Jones’s unfamiliarity with the trans community as a whole mars her interpretation of his life through unclear language, fractured pronouns, and lack of LGBTQ history. Meanwhile for Peirce, since her medium is film, her work can be “freed from the need to be faithful to facts,” and so she was able to adapt the story of Brandon's trauma into a “wishful construction of a lesbian romance” while simultaneously presenting a film that could also benefit from the gender outlaw label through Brandon being a butch lesbian or a trans-masculine figure who does not partake in medicalization (Cvetkovich 276). It is precisely the fact that the film was so open to interpretation which meant it was difficult to pinpoint for any particular group, so these “turf wars” (Cvetkovich 275) and “border wars” (Noble 43) were primarily fuelled by affect and emotion that adaptation scholars are well familiar with. What is then unique about Brandon Teena’s story in the milieu of adaptation studies is just how strongly and personally these groups hold their experiences up to the film. As Rachel Carroll has noted,

retrospectatorship is, indeed, a personal interpretative tool, one that can be used to reassert identity and remake cultural history especially if fueled by the trauma of misrecognition (*Adaptation* 43). But Patricia White (or any other queer viewer) does not lose her identity as a lesbian if Theo in *The Haunting of Hill House* is not read as a lesbian by everyone else; the personal reading remains compelling, and the lesbian viewer gets to keep her imaginative argument, and merely move onto another film, another representation, and engage in this type of reading all over again. But *Boys Don't Cry*, even decades after its release, is still marred by these various interpretations which seem to threaten the audience members who do not have their viewpoints validated. It is not merely that Hilary Swank is a cisgender woman playing a possible trans man; it is that, when she plays him, she also interprets him as one way in her acceptance speech (as part of the trans community), and by doing so, shuts down the other interpretations for his life (as that of a lesbian, a tomboy, a non-girly girl, the daughter of a family). This is why she apologized to the family in the aftermath, and why, in 2018 there were protests on college campuses related to the film and Peirce's interpretations (Halberstam *Trans** 118-120). By staking a claim in the border/turf war, Swank shut down the family, and when pressed, she apologized instead of continued to argue about her interpretation, which is not always what everyone else has done in this interpretative battle.

The interpretative stakes are higher for the story of Brandon Teena. This is no longer about watching movies or even rereading these films in different ways because there is a real person with a real life that has been lost, and there are those who must live in the aftermath. Buffalo Bill may have been based on a real-life person, too, but the facts of that case were already well-disguised through Harris's novel (and his amalgamation of other serial killers in addition to Ed Gein). There were also decades separating the initial Gein case from the book and

film production. There is little time difference from the initial crime to Peirce's film (at least in movie making terms; 1993 to 1999 is not that long at all) and there is definitely far more to lose. To read and interpret Brandon a lesbian (or at least to disavow any type of trans reading) not only obscures several aspects of his daily life—and most likely Lana's life as well, since she, like the many other girlfriends that Brandon had, were straight—but it also obscures the reality of trans men's daily lives, which is one of the reasons why Kim Peirce has been heavily criticized in the years after the film (Dry; also see Cvetkovich, Noble, and *Trans** by Halberstam). To erase Brandon Teena on screen, or in publicity events after the movie's production, or even through an apology by Swank, was to erase any chance of reading him as transgender *or* transsexual. To give up any kind of visibility and representation in this manner was monumental.

While trans women have been represented in media, even if their depictions are often polarized as deceptive/pathetic like Julia Serano notes (*Whipping* 40-44), transgender and transsexual men were virtually invisible from mainstream media in the 1990s. When Jamison Green published his memoir, *Becoming a Visible Man* in 2004, he deliberately pushed against the invisibility and silence that was (and sometimes still is) encouraged by doctors, but also by the construction of masculinity itself. Jonathan Ames' collection of transsexual memoirs only includes three selections written by trans men: Mario Martino, Loren Cameron, and Mark Rees. Jay Prosser's *Second Skins* examines these same memoirs, along with more recent autobiographical works by transsexual men (such as his final chapter at the end involving photographs [207-236]); Prosser also alludes to and narrates some of his own transition story in his work's introduction and conclusion. Though there are clearly examples of transgender and transsexual men telling their stories in the memoir genre, there is little representation of their stories on the screen—at least, until *Boys Don't Cry*.

The lack of trans representation for trans men is most likely due to the limitations of technologies which help facilitate transition. The transsexual plotline, as crafted and represented in previous era through *The Christine Jorgensen Story* and other films from Chapter One, is a storyline which involves a literalization of the gendered self, and therefore, often depicts a surgical procedure which both symbolizes the homecoming in the body and one that works to "heal the rupture of gendered plots" (Prosser 9). But, as Paisley Currah notes, "the histories, spatial arrangements, and physical terrains of trans people's bodies can confound conventional expectations" (331). This is especially the case for trans men, who do not have the same medical options as trans women, which then further affects how their bodies are read by a larger cisgender public sphere. As Currah notes

Some bodies are modified through hormones, various types of gender reassignment surgeries, or both, to produce bodies culturally commensurate with gender identities. In those cases, the perceived incongruence comes only from knowing the *history* of that individual's body. Other bodies, however, have unexpected configurations in their particular *geographies*— for example, breasts with penises for some, male chests with vaginas in others—that produce a dissonance. (This dissonance, to be clear, belongs not to the trans body but to *those gazers who have conventional gender expectations.*) (331; first two emphasis in original; third is my own).

Bodies which are "culturally commensurate" are often bodies which are culturally representable, and this cultural representability often hinges upon cisgender gazes and the "conventional gender expectations" that Currah makes reference to here (331). So while gender affirmation surgery can be several procedures, and these procedures do not always provide a neat linear

narrative, many memoirs and films represent the linear narrative as such; the entire act of transition—which can take months or years—is boiled down to a vacation and overseas trip in the adaptation process (Aizura "Persistence" 142). For trans women, this is often represented through the vaginoplasty or "bottom" surgery; for trans men, the "bottom" surgery is not nearly as common (as little as 3% have obtained it and often list pain and cost as a determining factor [Currah 300-336]) and so, there is no similar vacation motif in trans men's stories on the page or on-screen. It is my assessment, then, that these technological differences and limitations in surgery affect the way in which the real life trans-masculine story can then be represented into the cinema screen itself during this time period. Because surgery/medical care is different for trans men seeking transition, the adaptation process and cinematic codes that have typically gone along with representing trans women on the screen simply do not apply in the same way; trans men or trans-masculine figures are not as "culturally commensurate" (Currah 331) precisely because mainstream cinema is still dictated by typical gender expectations. As such, there is a "No Man's Land" (Noble xxx) of representation on the screen which is what *Boys Don't Cry*, and the documentary about Brandon Teena, subsequently fall into, and remain stuck, for years to come.

I'd also like to note that even if medical care and the representation of that transition were aligned and culturally understood, it does not necessarily mean that all trans men can still access that care, as the costs for such procedures can be prohibitory (Currah 331). These prohibitory costs affected Brandon Teena, who said under numerous occasions that he could not afford surgery, so he put it off entirely, or questioned whether or not it would do any good whatsoever (Jones 64; 77; 317). For someone like Brandon, from a rural, working class background, just because he had not had surgery or even hormone therapy (which is often cheaper and easier to

obtain according to Currah 331), it did not necessarily mean he did not identify as transgender or transsexual; what it does mean, however, is that there are limited ways in which these feelings of gender dysphoria can be adapted to the screen. In *Boys Don't Cry*, Brandon is shown handling pamphlets about gender identity; his chest is bound; he speaks about an "identity crisis" and about being a hermaphrodite. Pierce does present the audience with some of the everyday realities of the trans body on film (and has in more recent screenings of the film emphasized this trans reading of Brandon), but the film ultimately becomes a fragmented and incomplete image of what it can mean to be trans because of the lack of unity in language, accessibility of medical care, along with the director/writers/actors own biases and preferences in what they think they are creating. Brandon, much like Jame Gumb, cannot enter into the medical system for various reasons, and so neither one becomes presented on-screen with a cohesive or unambiguous image. Brandon is not allowed entry into the medical system because he is working class and cannot afford it, *and then* because his criminal activities get him in trouble and make transition even more difficult, while Jame Gumb is labelled "not a real transsexual" by biased professionals and is then held to those rigorous medical standards which turns his desire into a "pathological science" (Serano *Outspoken* 159). Both Buffalo Bill and Brandon die in their respective films as well, and these are violent deaths. While it is easy to see Brandon's death as a hate-crime motivated targeted attack, I also wish to suggest that it is/was also a slow death due to administrative violence which prevents access to healthcare, housing, jobs, and other basic living necessities to gender nonconforming people or those with unrecognized gender expressions. Trans legal scholar Dean Spade has noted that administrative violence affects trans people in remarkable ways since there is a "different location within the law—the administrative realm—" where the "law structures and reproduces vulnerability for trans populations" (9). The same kind

of slow administrative death is also mirrored in the case of Robert Eads, a trans man who was refused treatment for his cancer because no doctor knew how to treat with a trans man. By the time he received treatment, as the documentary about his life called *Southern Comfort* captures, his cancer had progressed too far and there was nothing else to do. Both Eads and Brandon Teena represent how class, transgender/transsexual identity, and trans-masculinity intersect to prohibit certain kinds of people from receiving treatment—or credibility—in their own lives, and how this lack of care subsequently leaves them vulnerable.

This vulnerability not only leaves trans people open to administrative or other violence, but the violence of misrepresentation, misunderstanding, and misapprehension of their own lives since this vulnerability often means not being able to express their gender in their own terms. Through there is the documentary of Eads's life in which to hear his own voice, a lack of clarity mars Brandon Teena's life and gender, especially in the adaptations I've documented to here. The closest to Brandon's own voice is the "chilling" police audiotape where Brandon recounts the rape and attack of Lotter and Nissen to "viciously hostile sheriff [Locks]" who consistently takes the questioning back to Brandon's gender status (Cvetkovich 277). Brandon's eventual resistance to the sheriff's line of questioning is "punctuated by his almost inaudible statement, 'I have a gender identity crisis'" (Cvetkovich 277). His own testimony is yet another act of rereading; it is an explanation to someone else's hostility, a way of (re)viewing his life in order to form a cogent narrative. It is this "identity crisis" which then becomes a transsexual plotline to some viewers, or a butch lesbian's struggle with gender presentation to others, or something else altogether in these border wars. Cvetkovich's article about Brandon's story is critical here because of the way in which she engages with these notions of truth around his life and death, and what all these interpretations mean for Brandon. Though there are turf wars, movie adaptations, tombstones,

and strong theories, Cvetkovich reminds us of "how much we don't know about what [Brandon] actually thought or did" (277). Without a memoir, there is no way to definitively interpret his identity. There are only the artefacts of his life and death, which are also the artefacts of a crime.

Gender Criminal, Criminal Gender

Brandon was a victim at the hands of Lotter and Nissen, but he was also a criminal himself and used his criminal status in a way I see as comparable to Buffalo Bill's crimes, especially in terms of Halberstam's conception of a monstrous "postmodern" or patchwork identity (Halberstam *Skin Shows* 176). *The Brandon Teena Story* and *All (S)he Wanted* both emphasize Brandon's criminal status through gangster imagery (figure 8) and cowboy outlaw imagery (Jones 90, 271, 314). While many writers and groups have interpreted Brandon's death for traces of how he identified, I have found very little examination of the crimes he committed in order to understand how he thought of his gender. Though his forging of checks for cash never reached the level he needed to obtain surgery/transition, I see the criminal acts Brandon Teena committed as symbolic ways he performed his gender.

Through the inversion of his name, from Teena Brandon to Brandon Teena, and by donning the alias of Billy Brandon, he evokes the mythic status of an outlaw who constructs many different identities in order to evade police. As Michael Taussig notes, to disguise the self is to change the world the person inhabits. Not only do criminals alter their identity through surgery (such as facial reconstruction), but they also change their names to evade capture (117-125). Taussig draws a connection between criminal aliases (often used by the person under suspicion) and mythic titles belonging to criminals (often used by the state as a means to contain and control). These two titles are fundamentally different; what name the person uses depends on

whose side of the law in which the person aligns themselves. The power of names is obvious in the story of *The Silence of the Lambs*, especially with Jame Gumb's birth name and serial killer moniker. While Taussig notes that the face of the criminal may be changed through surgical procedures (or perhaps a mask/skin like with Buffalo Bill or Lone Ranger), there will still always be a real name left behind (Taussig 125). The 'real' name is the birth name, what comes to someone 'naturally' and inherited, and what will presumably not change as they get older. All other names are "nicknames or aliases"; they are the things used to hide, but not the real self (Taussig 117). Taussig's insistence on the real name underneath the cosmetic alterations humanizes the criminal, allowing them to step away from the make-believe world that their "cosmic surgery" opens up to them through their criminal enterprises (125-128). While I do not wish to gloss over the ramifications of calling a trans person by their birth name (also known as dead-naming), I do think that Taussig's approach to aliases is interesting because he makes the criminal association with changing names transparent, but he also humanizes the criminal in this process. A name is an artefact, another skin to don, something 'fake' and artificial, yet in the case of Brandon Teena, or the Lone Ranger, the name is also a protective force which works at maintaining an internal sense of self. Beyond the two known names that Brandon often used (Brandon Teena and Billy Brandon), he also stole IDs and licenses of young men in order to pass himself off as one (Jones 89; 111). When he used the ID of his cousin, Charles Brayman, and committed a crime under that name, he was even placed in trial and charged (Jones 122-3). By virtue of forging checks and appearing in a criminal court as Charles Brayman, he changed the world in which he inhabited, and thereby became articulated inside the law as a man. Brandon Teena used the criminal system in a similar way that a trans woman named Debbie Mayne did in the 1950s. I wish to rehash this case study, as captured by legal scholar Ian West in

Transforming Citizenships: Transgender Articulations of the Law, because it is important to understand just how much influence gender has within the law, and how the law can then be used to, in some ways, craft a coherent gender identity.

One day in the 1950s, while Mayne was dressed in men's clothing, she used the men's facility of Los Angeles's Pershing Square. Afterwards, she found a vice officer at the location and told him that she intended to transition to a woman; since she had used the men's facility, and the officer took "Mayne at her word" that she was a woman, and she was arrested for "masquerading as a man" (West 37). A few days later, she returned to the mall dressed as a woman and used the women's facilities. When she told the same officer this time, she was arrested for masquerading as a woman and inspected at the station to see if her genitals matched her medical record, which was a common practice during the time. After examining Mayne and her records, the examiner "stopped short of declaring Mayne a woman" (West 40) so the charges still held. The city prosecutor, as West notes, wanted to simplify the "already complex situation, [by combining] the charges and scheduled one hearing" (37)—which meant that Mayne went on trial at the same time for masquerading as both genders. Since her body had already undergone transition, her documents did not always match, and her inspection had yielded inconclusive results, everyone "sidestepped" the issue of legal sex and instead focused on whether or not Mayne's intentions when she was "masquerading" were lewd; she would eventually be acquitted (West 37-38). West finds Mayne's case fascinating, and so do I, precisely because Mayne's case becomes

an example of one of the means by which trans people negotiate the material conditions that constrain and enable their living of meaningful lives. Mayne's public and hidden transcripts demonstrate the agentic navigation of trans people

through the interpenetrating circuitries of medical, legal, and mass-mediated discourses. (40).

In order for Mayne to become visible during this time period, she effectively needed to become a criminal. And during the 1950s and 1960s, a mismatch between gender expression and physical body was criminalized.

As both Isaac West and Leslie Feinberg note in their work, longstanding rules required men and women to wear at least three pieces of gender appropriate clothing when they were out in public (Feinberg *Warriors* 8; West 37-42). If they did not comply with this rule, or if an officer had suspicion that someone was not complying, they could be stopped, searched, and subsequently punished. These rules led to extreme surveillance of LGBTQ areas and LGBTQ people, many of whom did not necessarily identify as trans, but instead challenged gender and patriarchal norms through clothing, gender expression, and romantic relationships. Indeed, Feinberg's greatest terror during this era came "when the police raided the bars, because they had the law on their side. They were the law" (*Warriors* 8; Feinberg also depicts these raids in *Stone Butch Blues*). The only relief from these searches until the Stonewall Riots was Halloween, since the holiday was one of the few times gender-nonconforming people could dress as they wanted and not be stopped on the street (Feinberg *Warriors* 8). To be gender variant in any way during the 1950s and 1960s meant that one became associated with criminality. "Of course," as Feinberg states, "the laws were not simply about clothing. We were masculine women and feminine men. Our gender expression made us targets. These laws were used to harass us" (*Warriors* 8). Even when these laws were no longer enacted, gender variant people still became targeted by police searches and raids because of this previous criminal association. To not embody a proper state within the confines of the gender binary meant that there was something

to hide—they were "deceivers" (Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 40)—and being unable or unwilling to conform to gender roles therefore made (and still makes, as Spade notes) the whole body criminal and suspect, especially if one is trans in any way (see *Normal Life* by Spade for more). Though "masculine women" and "feminine men" (Feinberg *Warriors* 8) are no longer searched on the street at this time of writing, or even during the 1990s when the events occurred in Nebraska surrounding Brandon Teena, these legal documents and public transcripts are still important to keep in mind since transgender/transsexual people have a fundamentally different relationship to the law than LGB people might. Trans people are criminalized because of their gender identities in numerous respects—but they can, as Mayne did, also use this totalizing force in order to be rendered visible as their desired gender.

Indeed, Brandon's criminal acts were really gendered acts; he became a gender outlaw by inverting his names into a criminal alias and the items he stole were both for survival (a male ID so he could pass as a male, and get a job as a male) and for his desired identity (stealing men's suits and ties in order to wear). When he did buy other items that were not related to his clothing/dress or living expenses, they were often gifts for the women in his life. Each gift he bought was so a girlfriend would continue to think of him as the best boyfriend he could be; by showering women with gifts he had stolen, he performed masculinity, and allowed for his gender identity to be validated a little longer through criminal methods of production. Bobby Noble has also examined Brandon's masculinity through the lens of class—such as his adoption of the term "trailer park Romeo" (143)—and through these various gift exchanges. I see my own examination of his criminal status as part of his gender identity in a similar way, since many of his crimes were survival crimes, committed in part *because* he was lower class and could not afford to do anything different. To see these crimes as part of his survival means there were few

options available; the choices that he did actively make, then, must be viewed and analyzed (for instance, Brandon could have stolen the IDs of women, but he did not). He stole the IDs of men—and men who might look like him, such as his cousin—in order to obtain the elusive sex marker on the licence, and (to possibly) do so without surgery. This does not mean he did not wish for medical care, or wanted to complete the transsexual plotline as Prosser might describe it (101); it only means that he could *not* complete the transsexual plotline through the typical means at this time and place in his life. Furthermore, focusing on *how* he used his crimes and his class to then perform masculinity also allows for a reading of his life along both transsexual and transgender plotlines.¹¹

The downfall of using crimes as gender embodiment, of course, meant that Brandon Teena was always going to be on the run. He could not stay in one place because his bad checks and bench warrants would catch up to him, along with his birth gender. *All (S)he Wanted* is filled with Brandon's consistent jumps between families, girlfriends, and motor homes in order to continue to perform his identity as he wished. In this way, I see the motor home—rather than the typical narrative trajectory of the transsexual homecoming (Prosser 101)—as embodying Brandon's desired gender the most. The motor home (especially as represented in documentary and nonfiction work) manages to articulate the "trailer park Romeo" that Noble sees in his story (143) while also acknowledging his lack of ability to remain in one place due to the survival crimes he has committed because he was lower-class; the motor home allows for an emotional sense of archetypal homecoming (Prosser 101) while also noting that narrative's structural problem with fixity (Halberstam *Trans* * 150).

¹¹ I focus on the how, and emphasize it here, especially since Halberstam has analyzed the where and when (time and place) of Teena's story and embodiment in his work in *A Queer Time and Place*.

Overall, however, it is *Boys Don't Cry* that mainstream audiences remember, and that storyline only offers a relatively short glimpse into Brandon's outlaw status, as his relationship with Lana is what slows down the movie's timeline (romance being another kind of "temporal drag" that Elizabeth Freeman discusses, and that I will examine in the next chapter [5]).

Eventually, it is the love story which leads to Brandon's downfall—not because he was trans necessarily, but because he stays in one place too long (Cvetcovich 276). Once people become aware that Brandon's writing bad checks, he is put in a woman's jail cell, and everyone in the town, including John Lotter and Tom Nissen, become aware of his birth gender. They use the information of his gender, and of his crimes, to fuel their justification for the attack and rape. Brandon is seen as a deceiver in Julia Serano's understanding of the term (someone who passes well as their gender the reveal is a shock), but he is also a deceiver in the criminal sense (he writes bad checks and therefore commits fraud) (Serano *Whipping* 40-44). In this context, his apparent deception was in both forging his identity as a man and forging checks for money. It is only when Brandon tries to go to the police, and he is not helped by the "viciously hostile" Locks (Cvetkovich 277), that he is made even more vulnerable as a trans body because he is stuck in one place. Like Buffalo Bill, once he is stuck in one place, he is also a sitting target and becomes a victim. As a film, *Boys Don't Cry* marks a clear progression from misunderstood criminal to victim of a violent crime, and the turf wars about the film only exacerbates this fracture, since if he is claimed as a lesbian, his death renders him the ultimate victim of a hate crime—whereas if he is claimed as transgender/transsexual, he becomes a deceiver criminal who may have been punished unfairly for what he had already done. Moreover, though Nissen and Lotter also murdered Phillip DeVine and Lisa Lambert, their deaths do not receive the same kind of turf wars or media attention that followed Brandon Teena's. Lisa is represented in the film version of

Boys Don't Cry (through the character of Candace), but Philip Devine is conspicuously missing. By not adding another victim to this crime, the filmic version manages to isolate Brandon as a threat to cisgender, straight women *and* as a victim to men, straddling his identity in both victim/criminal through the acts done to him and those he did to others. By removing DeVine, the hate-crime motivation at the centre of the story becomes larger *as does* Brandon's status as outlaw. By structuring the film in this way, Cvetkovich notes that "*Boys Don't Cry* implies that some deaths are more important than others, and it misses an opportunity to tell a more complicated story about the violence that occurred—one that would shift from the fantasy of the romantic couple back to the broader social context within which they moved" (276).

Ultimately, no story version gets Brandon Teena and the events of December 30th 1993 right, not just because how little anyone knows about what Brandon thought or did, but because each adaptation and interpretation fails to take into consideration the situations that created the violence and criminals at the centre of it—or if they do, another vulnerability minority is left out, and the cycle starts all over again. While retrospectorship can be a relief, it can never be done in a social vacuum—which is why, in spite of the critiques that I have brought to the film, I think it is very important to end this analysis with Halberstam's assessment—actually a reassessment—of *Boys Don't Cry* in his latest work, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Guide to Gender Variance*. After analyzing the film in his 2005 work *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, and then witnessing the backlash against Peirce for years (cumulating with protests on college campuses which he documents on pages 118-121 of the book), Halberstam rightly notes that when

Peirce made *Boys Don't Cry*, most films featured transgender people only as monsters, killers, sociopaths, or isolated misfits [...and few] treated transgender

people with even a modicum of comprehension, and even fewer dealt with the transphobic environments that were part of heteronormative family life. Very few films prior to *Boys* focused on transgender masculinity at all, and when transgender male characters did appear in film, they were often depicted as women who passed as men for pragmatic reasons (, e.g., *The Ballad of Little Jo*, 1993) or as androgynous figures of whimsy (e.g., *Orlando*, 1992). *Boys Don't Cry* is the first film in history to build a credible story line around the credible masculinity of a credible trans-masculine figure. Period. (120).

In spite of the overall lack of coherence, Brandon Teena is still ultimately a “trans-masculine” figure on-screen (Halberstam *Trans** 120), one which was one of the first of its kind, and one which solidified numerous techniques for representing gender variance and gender difference for years to come.

Conclusion

I have returned to these images of Buffalo Bill/Jame Gumb and Brandon Teena because they both represent the trans monster/criminal archetype in both its negative and positive potential, but I also returned to these images and their adaptations since each one also embodies the American ethos of the road, in both its most positive and most dangerous potentials. Jame Gumb and Brandon Teena, however, are not the only representations of gender criminals in this era. As Jack Halberstam notes, there is also the "brilliant independent film" *By Hook or By Crook* written and directed by Harry Dodge and Silas Howard in 2001. The film blends together the road narrative a la Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*, only it is now two trans* men behind the

wheel, and they are looking for one of their birth mothers, rather than Dean Moriarty's father. Along the way, they engage in hijinks and petty crimes; fight and fall in love; and then they find a way to go someplace else once the first journey has come to a close. *By Hook or By Crook* takes the potential of the road story as "freedom, knowledge, and transformation" (Ford and Slethaug 4) and combines it with the criminal drifter in order to present a fully realized representation of the gender outlaw as Feinberg and Bornstein have discussed.

Yet this story does not shy away from the ambiguities or the moral endings of other stories. As Halberstam notes in *Trans**,

The transgender figures are just "he," with no explanation for their eccentric gendering given. Instead, the film highlights intimate bonds, sex, and love as the real themes of the film, showing the buddies on a quest that has no stable outcome; it is a road movie without an obvious destination. The quest functions instead as a metaphor for "continuous transition"—one of the features of trans* identity that makes it different from transsexualism. (114).

In some ways, *By Hook or By Crook* has the happy ending denied in *The Brandon Teena Story* and *Boys Don't Cry*. Trans-masculinity remains visible and present, but also still tied to crimes and outlaw status. It is seemingly the best of both worlds, while also not shying away from the tyranny of positive images that Halberstam has criticized mainstream films for in the past (*Female Masculinity* 179). *By Hook or By Crook* shows some aspects of trans masculinity, in all its potential grittiness, and without punishing the trans* men who inhabit this gender for their transgressions. It is this "perpetual transition" narrative (Halberstam *Trans** 150) that *By Hook and By Crook* utilizes that I will return to in the next section—but for now, I want to highlight a different use of the criminal narrative, one that thrives in the peripheries, but nevertheless does

not reach the mainstream in the ways in which these two gender outlaws of Buffalo Bill and Brandon Teena have. Through making a skin suit or forging checks, both Buffalo Bill and Brandon Teena manage to find a way to perform and embody their gender identity like the characters in *By Hook and By Crook*, but they pay a heavy cost in order to do so. Precisely because they engage in criminal behaviour outside the law to construct themselves as gender outlaws, it means that their gender journeys cannot ever amount to a narrative homecoming, even after their embodiment, because to go home meant they would only be captured and criminalized again. Therefore, in this era of filmmaking, to be a gender outlaw means to be constantly on the run and queered at the edge of the big screen.

Stryker also acknowledges this difficulty in her essay on Frankenstein when she states that "[t]ranssexual monstrosity, however, along with its affect, transgender rage, can never claim quite so secure a means of resistance because of the inability of language to represent the transgendered subject's movement over time between stably gendered positions in a linguistic structure" ("My Words" 247). It is precisely language that seems to fail both of these representations of trans people on the screen most of all, since Jame Gumb is "not a real transsexual" according to an incarcerated doctor while Brandon Teena's lasting legacy in his own voice is a "chilling" (Cvetkovich 277) audiotape that proclaims a "gender identity crisis" (Jones 82). Yet the *feeling* that both of these representations has is present and palatable; that feeling is transgender rage as Stryker describes it, and is these trans feelings which will gain more importance on the bigger screen as the 1990s turns into the 2000s and more voices are added to the counter-discourse. As Stryker notes,

transsexuals are something more, and something other, than the creatures our makers intended us to be. Though medical techniques for sex reassignment are

capable of crafting bodies that satisfy the visual and morphological criteria that generate naturalness as their effect, engaging with those very techniques produces a subjective experience that belies the naturalistic effect biomedical technology can achieve. Transsexual embodiment, like the embodiment of the monster, places its subject in an unassimilable, antagonistic, queer relationship to a Nature in which it must nevertheless exist. (“My Words” 248).

It is these places which "must nevertheless exist" (248) that are so often found on the road, especially in the American film and literature canon. To “rise up” in this manner is to answer the call of the adventure (Stryker “My Words” 248), which is one of the first steps in the hero's journey (Campbell 1), and it is a journey which will soon have trans people behind the wheel.

Chapter Three

From Temporary Transvestite to *Transamerica*:

The Road Film and 1990s to Early 2000s Trans Representation

Introduction

In *Hit the Road*, Jack Gordon Slethaug describes *To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything, Julie Newmar!* as one of the numerous films from the 1990s which acts as a faithful adaptation of the Romantic notion of the road, while simultaneously offering a “postmodern pastiche” (“Mapping” 36). While Slethaug argues that the film questions hegemonic masculinity, many trans theorists, activists, and media scholars have argued that it (and its similar counterpart *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*) is a fundamental misunderstanding of trans identity through a conflation with drag experience, which then undermines the real life trans person’s struggle (see Straayer, Ryan, Serano *Whipping*). To some scholars, the cross-dressing characters in these films are part of the “temporary transvestite” (Straayer 42-78) or the “self-hating drag queen” (Ryan 159) trope on-screen, which renders their gender ambiguous bodies as deceptions or pathetic stock jokes (Serano *Whipping* 40), and which the casting of cisgender male actors only furthers. These tropes represent some of the most misinformed medical and academic theories on trans people’s lives available during the 1990s. However, I argue in this chapter that these two road films, and especially the much later road film of *Transamerica* (2005), can be read as the “archetypal” travel narrative which Jay Prosser described in *Second Skins* (101).

In this chapter, I examine both *To Wong Foo* and *Priscilla* as a “freeplay adaptation” (Slethaug *Adaptation* 125-7) of the debates in trans and mainstream feminism during the 1990s,

while also providing a trans* reading of these characters and their road plotlines (Halberstam *Trans** 107-117). I do this through an exploration of the broken down car, a repeated trope in the road genre and in both these specific films, as the focus of this new “postmodern pastiche” (Slethaug, “Mapping” 36) which seeks to critique the academic theories that often exclude transgender *and* transsexual women. Though the casting of cisgender actors in these roles can easily mark these films as insensitive representations of trans and/or gender-nonconforming people, and part of the “temporary transvestite” trope (Straayer 42-78), it is precisely because their feminine presentation is not temporary—rather, it seems to be the main vehicle for expression in all these characters—which makes me resist reading these films negatively, and instead reread these films as trans* narratives which embody the “freedom, knowledge, and transformation” (Ford and Slethaug 4) of the road plot while also complicating the notion of homecoming. I use Jack Halberstam’s understanding of trans* in this chapter as “a repudiation of the veracity of the visual (passing), an embrace of the haptic (unknowing), and a narrative framework of continual transition (becoming)” in order to make this claim (*Trans** 115-6), along with Elizabeth Freedom’s concept of “temporal drag” (5), which I assert allows these road narratives to slow the transition down between stages. I also combine these concepts with Gordon Slethaug’s understanding of “automobility” (“Mapping” 25) and Kate Bornstein and Leslie Feinberg’s construction of the “gender outlaw” in order to demonstrate how these 1990s road narratives document the daily lives of their protagonists, which gives their struggles against transphobia and homophobia, along with their gender identities, a sense of legitimacy and permanency that is missing from other films in this era.

In the last half of the chapter, I take the 2005 film *Transamerica* as a reflection of the outcome of the 1990s debates in feminism (both in and outside of the academy) and demonstrate

how the “archetypal” (Prosser 101) travel narrative which in previous eras was an overseas vacation (Aizura “Persistence” 142) has now shifted to a cross-country road trip where the doctor’s role now becomes shared by both the therapist and the transsexual patient. This new reading restores agency to the transsexual plotline of earlier films while also providing a faithful adaptation of the feelings of gender dysphoria into a road trip. By reaching backwards in her previous life order to find her son Toby, Bree’s narrative becomes a road trip that also promotes “freedom, knowledge, and transformation” (Ford and Slethaug 4) while adhering to the self-realization plot structure of previous transsexual memoirs. Rather than compressing her journey into an overseas trip that exists in a blink on the screen, her journey is slowed down in order to give agency to her feelings and reclaim her life in her own way. Moreover, the shift in focus from a medical doctor to a therapist as the co-creational partner in gender transition I view as representational of the dramatic shift between Gender Identity Disorder to Gender Dysphoria in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition (DSM-V) and as expressed in some of the trans memoirs in the 1990s to early 2000s.

All three of these films—*To Wong Foo, Priscilla*, and *Transamerica*—demonstrate the potential of the trans road trip to literalize both the trans* narrative of “perpetual transition” (Halberstam *Trans** 150) by resisting the traditional homecoming ending, and to literalize the “archetypal” (Prosser 101) and “mythic” (Prosser 116) journey in modern terms through an adaptation of gender dysphoria into a road narrative. By viewing both these narratives as expressions of gender identity, I seek to represent a diversity of potential experiences on film through the act of retrospectorship and “freeplay adaptation” (Slethaug *Adaptation* 125-7), while also encouraging a state of Sandy Stone’s “someness” in this era, rather than a totalizing oneness (Halberstam *Trans** 116; Stone 232).

Temporary Progress

The 1990s was a landmark decade for trans representation. From 1991's *Soapdish* to 1999's *Flawless*, transgender, transsexual, and gender nonconforming characters seemed to be everywhere on screen. However, these works were not always well received as an accurate picture of trans people, their lives, and social struggles. As many trans critics have noted, most poignantly Julia Serano and Joelle Ruby Ryan, the start of the decade began with Buffalo Bill in *The Silence of The Lambs* and Dil from *The Crying Game*, and both characters would become the models for the binary at the heart of trans representation: pathetic or deceptive (Serano *Whipping Girl* 40-44). Serano and Ryan hinge their assessments of these tropes on cisgender people's perspectives, meaning that Jame Gumb (Buffalo Bill) and Dil are deceptive or pathetic due to notions of gender passing and medicalization which are heavily influenced by cisgender beauty ideals (Ryan 108-111; see also Currah). The previous chapter examined a version of the deceptive trope: that of trans criminal or trans monster; someone who ultimately passes so well they deceive those they are around and then become a threat to the normative social order (Serano *Whipping* 40-44; Ryan 177-236). Pathetic trans pathetic characters are, in theory, never supposed to pass as women; in fact, they are supposed to be quite bad at performing femininity (Serano *Whipping* 40-44). Pathetic trans women characters in particular, such as John Lithgow's Roberta Muldon from *The World According to Garp* or Chris Sarandon as Leon in *Dog Day Afternoon*, were just as prevalent before the 1990s as they were during the 1990s when their cinematic codes became solidified. Many of the films examined in Chapter One can be viewed as early versions of the pathetic trope as well, especially the pre-transition scenes from *The Christine Jorgensen Story*. Nevertheless, both sides of the deceiver/pathetic binary ultimately

represent the trans person as dangerous to the normative assumptions of gender, sex, and biology and in this schema, trans-femininity as particularly suspect.

Many of the filmic representations from the 1990s also presented trans identity as temporary. As Chris Straayer describes, the “temporary transvestite” is a character who has appeared in numerous films and television shows since the 1950s; 1959’s *Some Like it Hot* and 1982’s *Tootsie* are good examples, but trope became especially popular in the 1990s with such characters like Mrs. Doubtfire and numerous drag queen films (42-78). Nearly all of these “temporary transvestite” characters don women’s attire as a means to an end; none are ever deemed transgender or transsexual in any meaningful, cultural, or material way. While these characters pass on screen, there are often several instances which strain the credulity of their gender performances; these scenes are depicted for their potential comedy value (and laughs) since the audience is often aware of the disguise in action.¹² Yet, even when these characters are found out for their disguises, there are no—or very few—social consequences from these cross-dressing actions, unlike the other pathetic trope representations. For example, in the 1985 film *Just One of the Guys*, when the main character Terry does not win a writing award, she believes it is because she is a woman and so she disguises herself as a boy and re-registers in high school. While some of her attempts at passing are successful, thereby causing her to deceive the man who ultimately becomes her love interest, her attempts at being “just one of the guys” and the inevitable failure of this endeavour lands her in the realm of the pathetic trope, but without any discernible consequences for her actions. She, like Leon in *Dog Day Afternoon*, is a pathetic trans character because the desired gender is not wholly believed (especially by the audience, who for Terry, are ‘in’ on the joke); except that when Terry’s presentation fails, she still gets the

¹² *Tootsie* offers several a good example of these multiple misunderstandings, and as such, highlight how pathetic the attempts at gender presentations are overall, which is why I see the trope of the “temporary transvestite” as part of the pathetic side of Serano’s divide.

life she wants while Leon is forced in an in-between realm of gender identity and lacking recognition for that gender. Terry's cross-dressing, like the cross-dressing of the father in *Mrs. Doubtfire*, or Dustin Hoffman in *Tootsie*, is meant to come off at the end of the story (and never be put on again); moreover, there are just as many scenes of these characters outside of their 'disguise' as there are in their 'disguise' which creates and establishes a former life narrative that they will easily slip back into when the film is over, and one that the audience will have no problem envisioning outside the theatre.

In her expansion of Chris Straayer's trope, trans media scholar Joelle Ruby Ryan acknowledges that in order to better their own lives, these (presumably cisgender) characters "utilize temporary gender transformation to infiltrate other people's social worlds" and while there "they create huge emotional turmoil and hurt people quite deeply" all of which is soon forgiven by all the main characters as "gender and sexual normalcy are faithfully restored" (51). These temporary transvestite films effectively posit the message that one should be "who you are not in order to get what you want" which then further complicates the already loaded and deeply entrenched binary of deceptive/pathetic in trans representation (51). While cross-dressing in cinema has also been seen as temporary in previous decades (especially Golden Era Hollywood), it has come with vastly different socio-political meanings. During the era of the Hays Production code, men's attire on women and women's attire on men on-screen was a way to code certain characters as queer; these "cinematic codes" then spoke for queer people when nothing else could (White 97). When the Hays Code was retired in 1968, and the feminist movement gained more popular recognition alongside the rise of trans visibility and politics, the cinematic codes which represented cross-dressing and queerness took on completely new meanings, as I documented in Chapter One. While it was now possible to read and interpret a transsexual

plotline from some of these cross-dressing cinematic codes, it still often became fragmented under the pathetic/deceptive binary. Certain acts of cross-dressing were now coded as pathetic attempts to appropriate another sex as one's own, which was inevitably doomed for failure (such as Roberta Muldon or Leon, as Serano records [*Whipping* 40-44])—or these acts of cross-dressing became so good they could easily deceive, and if someone is deceiving someone else, it means they want something. Therefore, the temporary transvestites who donned their attire solely to *not* be who they were “in order to get what [they] want” emerged and became solidified in popular culture through conscious and unconscious repetition.

Furthermore, characters who deceived in such a manner were often wrapped up in another morass of gender associations, often fuelled by antagonism against feminism. From *Tootsie* to *Bosom Buddies*, men dressed like women in order to get ahead in the workforce that was now viewed by politically conservative commentators as dominated by women since the Equal Rights Amendment was revised in the 1970s. In the 1990s, it was the image of the supermom, rising daycares rates, and no-fault divorces which spurred Mrs. Doubtfire's creation, a film about a divorced dad who is deprived of his children so he becomes a nanny in order to see them without the mother being aware (Ryan 17). When patriarchal control is challenged in some way, men become women on-screen in order to take back what they once had sole control over. Or in *Just One of the Guys* and other films with women dressed as men, the deception was done in the service of feminism (Terry feels discriminated against for being a woman so she becomes a man to figure it out for herself) or as a way to be pragmatic against the sexist world (such as *The Ballad of Little Jo*, 1993). Precisely because men donning women's attire is seen as a way to parody femininity and/or trick someone, or women donning men's was seen as an obvious answer to sexism, trans people on-screen have had a contentious history of

representation which often bleeds out into real life. As both trans actress Jen Richards and trans scholar Joelle Ruby Ryan note, by continuing to present characters who cross-dress for access to a sacred place (be it a bathroom, locker room, workplace, or domestic home) and then discard this identity by the end of the film, makes it seem as if all trans people will also discard their identity in real life (Ryan 51-52; Richards qtd in Rodriguez). Moreover, if cisgender audiences get used to seeing cisgender men playing trans women, it consistently puts forward the idea that all trans women are just men in drag, and that “trans itself [is the] performance” (Richards qtd in Rodriguez).

In addition to the pathetic/deceiver binaries evoked in popular Hollywood films, real-life depictions of drag culture on-screen often left audiences (especially audiences outside of these communities) unsure what being trans exactly meant in the 1990s. The 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning* about the New York City ball culture is probably one of the best examples of how drag culture, transgender/transsexual bodies, and gay men all became fused in this decade, along with RuPaul’s rise to celebrity status (Richards; Hillz). Previous cinematic codes from earlier films used in order to designate the transsexual plotline (such as the mirror, cross-dressing, and reveal shots; all used in *The Christine Jorgensen Story* and repeated without much variation in 1999’s *Flawless*) became unmoored from distinct meaning in the 1990s thanks to more attention paid to real-life images (such as from *Paris Is Burning*) but without much added context or accessible commentary to these images for the mainstream (cisgender) public. Coupled with Judith Butler’s declaration in her 1992 *Gender Trouble* that there was “no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (25); Esther Newton’s work on drag culture; along with Susan Sontag’s “Notes on ‘Camp’” (191-203) and the meanings of transgender/transsexual identity

seemed to be lost entirely within the postmodern academic language of the 1990s, and especially lost and confused when represented cinematically outside the community itself. Even films which attempted to present cogent meaning and a gendered plotline only ended up presenting a flawed teleology of “Gay = drag queen = transsexual” which is, as in Ryan’s assessment of the film *Flawless*, “too tightly intertwined and conflated to allow for such a complex understanding of the intricacies and separations between gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation” (169). The only cinematic code which remained from an earlier era of filmmaking in order to differentiate between transsexual women and gay men on-screen was medical care, surgery, or the desire for such procedures. Indeed, this is how Venus Xtravaganza expresses her transsexual identity in Jenny Livingston’s *Paris is Burning*, along with The Lady Chablis in *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, and fictional counterpart of Rusty in *Flawless*. Their recognition within the transsexual plotline is predicated on their involvement with doctors who facilitate their transition and then *telling the audience about it*; the reveal shot of another era is, in some of these 1990s films, now sublimated into the confessional shot. In some ways, this is a much better adaptation, as these films now allow for the emotional content of the trans story to become represented on the cinematic screen without such explicit eroticization and objectification as previous eras. Indeed, The Lady Chablis in *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* stands out as one of the better representations to me partly because she literally plays herself; not only does a trans woman play a trans character, but she plays her own life story on the screen, something of which the author of the source text did not do (as his role in the narrative was cast to John Cusack). Her representation is solely in her control, which was why she wanted the role, going so far as to say that “If I’m not cast as myself in that movie, there won’t be a movie” (Associated Press). In other words, no one could play her better than herself,

and I am in full agreement. Yet representation, as I've stated in the bulk of this dissertation, especially when using the work of adaptation scholars and Patricia White's retrospectorship, is about what is on the screen but also what the audience does with what is on the screen (196-7). Even if *The Lady Chablis* performs herself as herself, there are still ways in which her story becomes mishandled, misapprehended, and otherwise misrepresented—if not by the producers or editors who may tweak her performance in the cutting room floor, but also potentially by the audience who watches it, especially the 1990s regular (cisgender) audience, whose familiarity with gender may be very limited. It is my assertion that a large part of the misreading or misunderstanding of trans people in the 1990s stems from the confusing and often out-right wrong asserts about drag culture, transgender, transsexual, and gender nonconforming bodies that make their way on-screen explicitly (through deliberately hurtful/exiling statements that Ryan has documented in her work) but more often implicitly (through assumptions and unchecked ideological bias). The best way to understand these assumptions, and how they sometimes seem to fuel entire films, is by viewing them as acts of freeplay adaptation.

Whereas most adaptation is predicated on some variation of page-to-screen (or movie-to-video game; video game-to-movie, etc.) where there is a source text and a secondary text, freeplay adaptation is less structured around distinct beginnings or endings of influence (Slethaug *Adaptation* 124-7). Rather than drawing from a singular source and presenting this in a linear order of events, freeplay adaptations borrow from several sources, images, authors, or even real life events in order to provide a coherent narrative. In his discussion of freeplay adaptation, Gordon Slethaug uses the example of Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing*, since it is drawn from a real life event along with the cultural milieu in which it was produced; then much later, the seemingly unrelated film *SMOKE* responds to Lee's film, and thus presents a

complicated and more layered message about race in America (*Adaptation* 126-7). Another example that Slethaug uses for his discussion of freeplay adaptation is the film *Smoke Signals*, which is based on a short story collection by Sherman Alexie. What both *Smoke Signals* and *SMOKE* (since it is also based on a short story by Paul Auster) do is collapse time barriers in their subsequent adaptations. *SMOKE* makes a short story into a full length film, and thus adds to/supplements the narrative whereas *Smoke Signals* collapses the boundaries between short stories in order to have multiple separate narrative threads now as one on the screen. Freeplay adaptation as a process allows for “indeterminacy of interpretation of the film *and* the anterior story” in order to highlight and comment on a particular issue (Slethaug *Adaptation* 127; emphasis mine). In Slethaug’s example, all of these films comment on race in America from a postmodern perspective. It is my assertion that, for the so-called drag queen films of the 1990s, rather than *intentionally* commenting on the on-going gender debates, these films drew from the culture in particular ways in an act of freeplay, and so presented an *incidental* pastiche of gender expression during the time period. Some of these films were regressive and did not do it well—but some films, intentional or not, drew from a series of on-going images and presented something interesting and worthy of study.

It is also my assertion that off-screen, and especially in the academy, this contention and confusion around (trans)gender identity went through its own form of citational freeplay adaptation where cis people often borrowed ideas and ideologies from media and recast these stereotypes and assumptions as truth in their writings. While Women’s Studies departments were taking the postmodern academic work of gender seriously, some transgender/transsexual people were struggling for recognition inside these very places (Serano *Whipping* 134; 188). Transsexual women in particular seemed to bear the brunt of this pushback and gender

conflation, as Julia Serano notes in her book *Whipping Girl*, which simultaneously acts as her gender memoir while also a critique of the postmodern framing of gender and queer culture in the academy. Serano writes that this postmodern reframing

led to the creation of another oppositional binary of sorts, pitting those transgender people who identify outside the gender binary (and who are therefore presumed to challenge gender norms) against transsexuals (who are accused of supporting the gender status quo by transitioning to their identified sex). Such arguments—that bigendered and genderqueer people are more ‘radical’ or ‘queer’ than transsexuals—are highly reminiscent of similarly naive accusations made in the past by homosexuals who argued that they were more ‘radical or ‘queer’ than bisexuals. The creation of such radical/conservative gender binaries are both self-absorbed and anti-queer, as they dismiss the very real discrimination transsexual and bisexuals face in favour of establishing pecking orders within the queer community. (*Whipping Girl*, 108).

Viviane Namaste also speaks about the threat of “erasure” from the academy as a transsexual person (9), and Patricia Elliot also notes similar contentious issues in her work documenting such “contested sites” especially as a cis person in trans feminism (18-20). Speaking from my own position, though I was a child when these debates in the 1990s were going on, my own education receiving a Women’s Studies degree (from 2006-2010) reflected the still somewhat exclusionary practice of keeping transsexual writing out of the academy (and therefore incidentally presenting the idea that trans women did not belong here; that the ‘real’ trans women were the ones I saw in media and they were deceptive/pathetic in such representations). There were no formal readings by trans people on any of my Women’s Studies syllabi, save for sections of Kate Bornstein’s

memoir *Gender Trouble*, and the one section that was present was read with a more postmodern understanding.¹³ As Serano describes in her own cultural work, trans women in the 1990s were often treated as interesting symbols which proved biology was no longer destiny, and similarly, that gender expression itself could mean whatever the person wanted it to mean (*Whipping* 133-154; 196-200). Trans people then became unique case studies and apt metaphors for postmodernism itself in some classrooms, yet without their work and writing being taken seriously as lived embodiment. As I've already discussed through Jack Halberstam, this postmodern turn in Women's Studies is one of the main reasons why there was also a simultaneous recommitment to essentialism in the writings of certain transsexual scholars of this period, such as Viviane Namaste, Stephen Whittle, Henry Rubin, and of course, Jay Prosser (Halberstam *Trans** 138). I will return to these readings of the transsexual plotline and embodiment when I examine Bree's narrative in *Transamerica* at the end of this chapter, since I argue that her narrative position at the end of this decade and into the early 2000s reflects the frustration some transsexual women felt within the academy with Judith Butler in particular (such as Julia Serano most notably) and how these frustrations were ameliorated, not by picking one side over the other, but working on a way in which everyone's gendered needs, desires, and embodiment were given space within the academy and outside of it. As Halberstam summarizes these debates and the decade itself:

Judith Butler's concept of "gender performativity," despite becoming the target of so many trans* critiques [in the 1990s], actually furnished trans* theorists with the theoretical framings necessary to push back on essentialist accounts of normative identities, on the one hand, and the fetishizing gaze at transgender

¹³ It would not be until the next year, the summer of 2011, where I would first find Julia Serano and then piece together the history I had been missing. I would also like to note that when I returned to the same university to complete my MA in 2011-2, there was a full credit class called Trans Feminisms. Whatever had been missing in my own undergrad was now being offered, at least, in some respects.

bodies, on the other. Butler's extensive work on gender and sexuality has been generative within queer and trans* and feminist circles partly because in it we find not only the principles that have created deep divisions but also the seeds of rapprochement. Indeed, tensions over Butler's legacy in relation to the vexed topic of "gender transgression" illuminate just how confused feminist discourse can be about the meaning of gender fixity and gender flexibility and the relation of each to normativity and transgression." (*Trans** 140).

I bring these varying interpretations in order to demonstrate how difficult it can be to sort out intentions of actors, writers, and directors in order to provide a coherent reading of certain films and characters, especially in amorphous decade of the 1990s. There are numerous films from this era which seem to present cogent narratives of transgender/transsexual life, but then become undermined through misinformation and/or overuse of these tropes; in effect, their act of freeplay adaptation cites the wrong source. Rather than solely looking at the screen for what it lacked, I see the transformative power in some of these depictions, especially the ones involving the "postmodern pastiche" (Slethaug "Mapping" 36) of the road film, and especially the two most notable films of *To Wong Foo* and *Priscilla*. Not only do these road narratives take the "freedom, knowledge, and transformation" (Ford and Slethaug 4) of the road narrative and place the "transvestites, transsexuals, drag queens and kings, cross-dressers, bull-daggers, stone butches, adrongynes, diesel dykes or berdache" (Feinberg *Liberation* 206) who make up Feinberg's idea of the gender outlaw as its main stars, but I believe they also present a pastiche of the postmodern gender theory which often tried to turn the trans person into a metaphor, and instead, these films deconstructed the metaphorical idea of transformation by presenting characters who embodied their gender identities on-screen. In other words, these road films put the gender

outlaw as their main characters, and by telling the story from their point-of-view, allowed for a possible trans* reading of the film itself.

Temporal Drag

In Prosser's formulation, the "archetypal" transsexual plotline has four stages, which were standardized in the memoirs he examined. To recap, the stages are as follows:

[1] suffering and confusion; [2] the epiphany of self-discovery; [3] corporeal and social transformation/conversion; [4] and finally the arrival 'home—the reassignment. (101).

The trans films of the 1970s attempted to document all of these four stages through a depiction of gender dysphoria visually on the body of the trans character for other characters (and the audience) to witness, while also combining the last stages into an overnight vacation/transformation with a sudden surgical reveal. The difference between two genders was represented quickly and starkly with very little ambiguity. Directors and writers accomplished this change through the actor choices, cinematic point-of-view shots which privileged the doctor's perspective, and by representing of the physical body of the trans person in close-up shots, often times conflating the body with similar landscape shots; films like *The Christine Jorgensen Story* (1970), *Myra Breckenridge* (1970), and *Let Me Die A Woman* (1977) all consolidated these techniques that I discussed in the previous chapter. In the 1990s, *The Silence of the Lambs* and *The Crying Game* then build on these techniques when they display trans bodies (often unclothed or in the act of 'tucking') in order to achieve a similar coding of a trans character on the screen. Rather than revealing the surgical procedure (the home/reassignment), these reveal shots are used to establish difference, and in many cases, then undermine the trans

person's presentation as deceptive or pathetic. "After all," as Jack Halberstam also echoes, "the trans* body is not so easy to represent, and the visual frame that captures such bodies either has to reveal sites of contradiction on the gender-variant body (through nakedness perhaps, which risks sensationalizing such bodies)" (*Trans** 107). The reveal shots in these films also mark a temporal moment when the trans character's time of gendered passing has also come to an end; it is the moment when violence disrupts the narratives (Fergus strikes Dil; Jame Gumb is revealed as the serial killer Clarice has been hunting) and when their gender presentation is stripped away through all "kinds of exposure, violent, intrusive, or otherwise" (Halberstam *Trans** 107). This violence disables the ending desired in Prosser's fourth stage; it is not that these characters aren't transsexuals (no matter what Hannibal Lecter may say); it is that they are prevented from fulfilling their transsexual plotline. Their story stops, but their gender identity does not. The halting of their transsexual plot often happens because these characters are side characters, not main ones of the film's story, and so their ending is not necessarily tied into the heart of the film's overall goal, message, or structure. Even if Dil remains Dil for the rest of *The Crying Game*, there is now resistance between her and Fergus; something which they now have to work through; and even once they do, this is not a movie about her but a film about Fergus.

These cinematic depictions are dictated by *time* as well as *distance*; the reveal shot is quick but meant to communicate a completed/in-progress transition, and the literal distance covered in the body is also the border between the two genders. To show the trans body in a full-shot is to, in effect, travel the entirety of gender transition in one blink—but then the farther away the perspective of the film is from the trans character, the more likely it is that their final narrative homecoming will *not* be produced for the audience to see. The "persistent of transgender travel narratives" (Aizura "Persistence" 139) happens when the camera pans and

focuses extensively on the gender ambiguous body *and* the movie is about the trans person, since it is only when it is their story that the audience has access to a before/after image in which to make sense of “the rupture in gendered plots” (Prosser 9). Without the after image, the transsexual plotline is only half-told, and so of course, it seems temporary in so many of the depictions from the 1990s, and especially when these characters are secondary or peripheral characters like Dil, Roberta Muldon, Leon, and Buffalo Bill all are, among others. Even The Lady Chablis, who plays herself in *Midnight In The Garden of Good and Evil*, is still a side character. The movie’s main story is not about her, but about the travel writer; the fame she received from the film would allow her to then write her own memoir, *Hiding My Candy*, where she is able to shift the perspective and narrate her own story in her own way, but it cannot happen on the screen.

The perspective is entirely different in *To Wong Foo* and *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, however. Both films take drag performers (and one trans woman) and makes them main characters as they go on a quest across America for various reasons. *To Wong Foo* begins with Vida Boheme (Patrick Swayze) and Noxeema Jackson (Wesley Snipes) tying in a drag show which gives them prize money to go across the country in order to compete at another level. They trade in their plane tickets in favour of a road trip, however, when they meet another performer Chi-Chi Rodriguez (John Leguizamo) who is sad about her loss. The three then go on the road together; they run into difficulty with one cop who sexually harasses Vida and whom she fights off and believes she’s killed. They run into trouble again when their car breaks down in a small town. The three of them bond with the townspeople and then leave in order to meet Julie Newmar at the final drag show, where Chi-Chi wins the crown. Similarly, *Priscilla, Queen*

of the Desert presents a road trip across the Australian¹⁴ outback with two drag queens Anthony/Tick and Adam (as played by Hugo Weaving and Guy Pearce) along with trans woman Bernadette (Terence Stamp) on-board; the trip is undertaken in order to reconcile a Adam with his estranged wife and child, but through a breakdown of the bus, they also meet a mechanic named Bob who falls in love with Bernadette. They all perform a final drag show and everyone's family and love life becomes reconciled.

In these films, directors and writers still use similar cinematic codes of cross-dressing in order to present a narrative about gender identity and gender ambiguous bodies, but they change the fundamental relationship to time, space, and distance through the use of the road narrative and the ways in which the characters embody—rather than solely perform or display—their desired gender presentation. While they do cast cisgender actors to play gender ambiguous bodies, and these films present (and some might say mock [Ryan 30]) the ball culture present in *Paris Is Burning*, these films take the perspective of the gender ambiguous characters, no longer rendering them side characters, which now gives them cinematic space that is not highly eroticized, violent, or “dangerously dysphoric” like numerous other depictions in this era (Halberstam *Trans** 143). Instead these films solely focus on the gender journey itself. It is a distinct iteration of this gender journey, since they begin in-media-res and completely disrupt and reinterpret Prosser's stages. For instance, one of the first stops on the road for the gender nonconforming characters in *To Wong Foo* is Vida's parents' house, which seems to invert and present the standard homecoming narrative right away (Prosser 101). Though Vida's parents see the characters in the car, and Vida stares wistfully at the house, there is no reunion before they all drive away. Not even a half hour into the film, and the family of origin has been rejected,

¹⁴ While my dissertation has been based in American studies and American popular culture, I've included *Priscilla* because of its road narrative and overwhelming success in North America, even if it was technically an Australian film.

something which Gina Marchetti sees as representative of “the death of the patriarchal norm” in most queer road films (202). The rejection of the biological family queers *To Wong Foo* from the start since rejecting the bloodline effectively means rejecting (re)productivity; their failure to complete the prototypical quest is not failure, then, but a deliberate choice about their family and how they embody the family home in particular (Halberstam *Queer Art* 18-19; see also *Queer Time* 5-9). Though the film engages with the typical symbols and items that make this a gender journey, *To Wong Foo* takes back the reins from heteronormative family acceptance, oppressive social norms, and even what it means to be a ‘transsexual’—since “when a man is a woman trapped in a man’s body and he has a little operation, he is a transsexual” but when a “gay man has way too much fashion sense for one gender, he is a drag queen” and they declare they are queens. They do not wish to have a “little operation”; they would much rather have too much fashion sense. While this categorization may seem as if it now marks their representation as part of the temporary trope, I’d also like to highlight the beginning of *To Wong Foo*, since it introduces the two main characters of Vida and Noxema as they get dressed for the first ball, and it is the only time that the audience sees them as their birth genders. The rest of the film—whether they are on stage or not—the three main characters remain in their feminine attire, including private spaces like a bedroom and/or a pit stop on the road. The temporary identity in this case seems to be the birth gender, which completely flips the temporary script from other films which utilize it. Moreover, *To Wong Foo* does this without a reveal shot. The characters’ birth bodies are never fully shown, and their identities in their ‘before’ mode are also obscured (for instance, their birth names are not revealed even when they are arrested or pulled over and typical licenses would list it). In addition, the song that plays while these characters get ready is called “Body Beautiful” by Salt-N-Peppa and seems to be the director/writer/producer’s way of

engaging with and emphasizing the physical materiality of their preferred gendered embodiment. While I do agree that the language the film uses is entirely misleading at times, and the casting of cisgender actors is insensitive, I do not think these characters can be considered part of the “temporary transvestite” trope (Straayer 42-79); there seems to be nothing temporary about them. In fact, the cinematic structure and the grammar of their representations slows down the typical gender journey plotline, thereby allowing for their gender presentations to appear permanent, which then provides a cinematic space to view them as trans*.

The journeys in *To Wong Foo* and *Priscilla* both begin in-medias-res, and therefore, means they are missing many of the stages that Prosser outlines as part of the “archetypal” plotline (101). The first stage of “suffering and confusion” along with the epiphany stage of self-discovery is rendered moot since these characters are already well established in their identities. Bernadette knows who she is (even if some characters try to assert her birth name at times), and so do Adam and Tick. Similarly, Chi-Chi, Noxeema, and Vida already know who they are and there is very little suffering about it. In fact, there only seems to be utter joy and praising their existence, especially as they record a set of rules about what it means to be a queen:

1. Let good thoughts be your sword and shield.
2. Ignore adversity.
3. Abide by the rules of love.
4. Larger than life is just the right size.

Rule two locates the core ethos of the film, and I assert, subsequently separates it from previous iterations of the temporary trope on-screen. This rule does not state that adversity is not true or not there; it also does not ignore the consequences of donning their cross-gendered attire, much like the previous iterations of this trope do (Ryan 62-74). Adversity from their gender is present

and sometimes quite violent, as there are numerous depictions in both films of homophobia and transphobia, as seen through the characters of Sheriff Dollard and the mechanic Virgil, (and those who tag the bus in *Priscilla* with graffiti)—but rule two states that it is better to ignore this adversity. Coupled with rule four, this effectively points out how that no matter what happens with these characters, they will *not* pass as the idealized cisgender beauty standards applied to trans women; they will not have, as Currah described, “bodies culturally commensurate with gender identities” (331). Rather, adversity will haunt them, like all queer travellers (Marchetti 202), but their response to this perpetual fear on the road is not conformity; they instead embrace their difference in being “larger than life.” The last stage of the gender journey, that of “the arrival ‘home’ — the reassignment” (101 Prosser) is also missing from both these films. Instead of this excluding it from the transsexual/transgender plotline or rendering it as part of the temporary transvestite trope, I instead view its lack as an expression of an extended third stage (that of social conversion/transformation), meaning that these characters, Terrance Stamp’s Bernadette included, are not wholly defined by their ending. They are not rejected or failures, but are merely enjoying an extended vacation. In my assessment, both films can then be read as distinctly trans* through Halberstam’s understanding of the term, where the narrative framing and representation itself depends on a “repudiation of the veracity of the visual (passing), an embrace of the haptic (unknowing), and a narrative framework of continual transition (becoming)” (*Trans** 115-116).

Halberstam uses his trans* categorization in a similar way as Lucas Crawford’s work on “transing” and “transgender architectonics” (*Transgender* 1-16; more on Crawford in the subsequent chapter) insofar as Halberstam uses the asterisk as a way to refuse “to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established

configuration of desire and identity” (*Trans** 21). In the context of the travel narrative, which is so often “persistent” (Aizura “Persistence 139)) and sometimes regressive (Bhanji 166), a trans* reading allows for the typical form to become more open and adaptive to what comes along—which is precisely what happens to each one of these sets of characters as their cars break down and they become embroiled in some adventure. “The asterisk,” Halberstam also notes, “holds off the certainty of diagnosis; it keeps at bay any sense of knowing in advance what the meaning of this or that gender variant form may be, and perhaps most importantly, it makes trans* people the authors of their own categorizations” (*Trans** 21). This is especially so for the trans* women in *To Wong Foo*, as they create and embody four new stages in their travel plans, making sure that they live larger than life—or at least, larger than an asterisk can contain. Each group takes back their right to define their journey in any number of ways, whether it is through resisting the ending of the journey itself or the label of transsexual, and they do it in a way that praises, rather than restraining, what they want.

I’d also like to keep in mind Elizabeth Freeman’s concept of “temporal drag” (in addition to Halberstam’s notion of trans*) as I go through these films since each one of these critical lenses draws on “the associations that the word ‘drag’ has with retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past on the present” (Freeman 5) which can then possibly lead to a perpetual “becoming” rather than a distinct ending on the screen (Halberstam *Trans** 115-6). Temporal drag is time slowing down, of being a drag, in addition to the drag of dressing in the cross-gender and being caught in-between. Because gender transition itself often takes months or years, so much of that time seems slowed down or delayed outright, especially if one does not have the means in order to afford the specific medicalization that will lead to a sense of closure or ending, be it homecoming into the body, or being recognized with a preferred sex marker on a birth

certificate, or something else altogether. By removing surgery as a narrative option in these films—through it does erase the possibility of a transsexual reading (and thus risk Namaste’s concern about “erasure” [9] as a whole)—the women of *To Wong Foo* (and in *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*) manage to make their gender identities and define them on their own terms, in their own perspectives, and on their own *time*. They are, in some respects, no longer “a big drag” (Freeman 5) but instead enjoy their daily lives on the road, answer to feminine names, and embody their identity for the freedom it can give them, rather than its possible restraints.

While I do acknowledge that the characters from these films can be read as self-hating drag queens or the temporary transvestite trope, and have been read this way in the past (most notably by Ryan and Straayer), I see the lack of clarity in some of these films as more of a lack of coherent understanding around the language, politics, and issues of identity during the 1990s that I have outlined earlier. Neither one of these films is based on a true story, but they have also clearly been inspired by *Paris Is Burning* in some meaningful way; they have pulled and cited from a variety of images that were circulating culturally, and therefore, have become freeplay adaptations (Slethaug *Adaptation* 125-7), or at the very least, they have a more “citational than fully adaptive” relationship to previous texts since RuPaul appears in *To Wong Foo* during the first drag show, and thus proves to be a first link back to an unspecified source (Slethaug *Adaptation* 125). Rather than completely disregarding the possible conflation of drag culture and trans misapprehension on the part of (most likely) cisgender writers and producers, I would much rather view these characters in another act of retrospectatorship where I argue for a trans* reading of their characters and their travels on the road. The play of the adaptation is now a play of gender, but gender on the road—i.e., the outlaw who can inhabit the in-between and revel there. Since the road has been seen as a beacon of transformation in American literature and film,

this image now merges with these character's gendered embodiment on their quest, which allows them to extend—not prevent or disavow or even render temporary—their gender journeys. It is not a temporary gender journey at all—rather, it is an extended stay in the in-between, a possible way to inhabit and see the world from the perspective of the gender outlaw.

Gender as Vehicle

Kate Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw: Men, Women, and The Rest of Us*, stands out as one of the first memoirs in a postmodern era (and in postmodern construction, since she does not tell a standard teleological narrative, but rather imbeds many asides and includes a play based on her gender identity) while also epitomizing the “persistent” trans travel narrative that so often appeared in previous transsexual memoirs (Aizura “Persistence” 139-140). Rather than defaulting to an imperialist logic at the heart of travel and exploration, however, Bornstein queers her travel by evoking outlaw imagery, such as the Lone Ranger (Bornstein 58), as I mentioned in Chapter Two. In one passage of her book, she documents how she traveled the US, transitioned, and then travelled once again across the US and Canada, remarking on her differing experiences—once as “a hippie boy, with hair down past my shoulders and dressed very colorfully” and another as a trans woman (60). In both trips, her gender ambiguous body caused “some good ol’ boys” to accost her and call her names, along with an attempted knifing (60). Her travels not only document the changing shape of road masculinity during this era (from hippie to biker), but also how her gender ambiguous body affects her overall privilege and what Slethaug calls “automobility” (“Mapping” 25). As Slethaug writes in *Hit The Road, Jack*, the introduction of the car “coupled with the road and a self-conscious perception of their relationship within culture” gave us automobility: a sense that the individual could achieve what they set out to get,

as long as they also had enough modern mechanical expertise (“Mapping” 25). Expertise in this case is automotive; knowing how to drive and being able to obtain transportation that one owns and can use to travel freely. Expertise is also the ability to move within the margins country, or in Bornstein’s case, move between the margins of gender identity itself; it is precisely knowing what to do with a gender ambiguous body in various spaces and circumstances, in addition to knowing what to do with a car. Thanks to the modern highway system and the affordability of the car, automobility expands in the 1950s and 1960s, and seemingly anyone can go on the road (Slethaug “Mapping” 35-7). While this is true for trans people, as Bornstein demonstrates, she must also be careful with both her car *and* her body as she explores. Moreover, for the gender nonconforming characters in these two films, automobility means they need not save for years in order to have a gender journey; they can merely take their drag queen prize/performance money and set out on an adventure under the terms they dictate, following the rules they come up with, and live “larger than life” in the process.

Yet in both of these films, their transportation also fails them at numerous points. The bus breaks down and is grafifi’d in *Priscilla*; after committing a crime, the characters of *To Wong Foo* also have their car break down in the middle of nowhere. In each one of these circumstances, the car is narratively positioned in the same space as the gender ambiguous body, and thus can possibly represent each character’s relation to their gender’s interior and exterior workings. Their mechanical delays, rather than becoming failures in their gender journeys, merely end up enabling each character’s sense of their own autobobility since acquiring mobility in the public sphere—especially when one exists as a gender outlaw who lives along “the borders of the gender frontier” (Bornstein 12) where they can be neither male nor female—is precisely about navigating and negotiating this expertise. Therefore, rather than the car breaking down

representing a failure, the breakdown of the car in these films is the way in which the outlaw status of the trans/gender nonconforming people is made viscerally real. By fixing the car, they do not necessarily fix themselves or adhere to the totalizing and normalizing forces of the outside world, but rather achieve the mechanical expertise at the heart of automobility in order to deal with—and perhaps even change—a broader trans- and homophobic world.

The connection between the body and the car in medical literature is not new either; in Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, the body was referred to as a car by surgeons as a way to “trivialize” what it was, but also as a way to understand the uses of plastic surgery for both a functionary capacity and for aesthetic purposes (257). Similarly, the body-as-machine becomes the way in which to envision modern medicine at the fin de siècle, along with postmodern identity (Seitler 16-17; 98). The trope of the road in narrative (cinematic or otherwise) also presents the car “at the crux of dueling” versions of the road, one of the “individual out to discover [and] transform himself [...] and the other [of ...] the risks and dangers” (Slethaug “Mapping” 27-8). For the trans road trip, the car then becomes a vehicle in which to enact gender in both its transformative *and* dangerous elements. Moreover, the broken down car is allowed to stand-in for the physical change that must be undergone while the women embody their own gender expressions; this is especially so for Bernadette whose character still seems to wish to be involved in the transsexual plotline. Rather than pitting the essentialist reading of gender against the postmodern pastiche involved in these stories (the “Ts/Tg hierarchy” as Patricia Elliot encapsulates in her work [33-60]), the car can be narratively positioned as the great equalizer among both sides.

Before the group leaves in *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, Adam christens the tour bus as Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (thus giving the film its title). From here, the bus takes on a female

pronouns as is standard in object-naming traditions, but her persona is one that toys with the idea of her femininity by dubbing her a “queen”; she is both female but also a heightened sense of feminine performance, like she is a motor vehicle but a bigger, more dramatic vehicle that will take them across the desert. It is the bus itself which embodies Butler’s definition of drag the best, since drag “subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity” (Butler *Gender* 174). Like Adam in his stage persona of Felicity Jollygoodfellow, the bus is also perpetually in drag throughout the course of the film and used to illuminate both the expressive model and true gender identity as Butler calls them. Yet the bus also experiences what Adam experiences; Adam is nearly attacked in a bout of homophobic violence while the bus is covered with graffiti that declares “AIDS FUCKERS GO HOME.” It’s Adam who attempts to remove the graffiti from the bus using lavender paint, and thereby forming yet another link between the bus and himself. As much as the vehicle mocks gender in this film, it also provides the solution to the dizzying array of gender presentations from which to choose. The bus, like Butler within trans studies, seems to both furnish “trans* theorists with the theoretical framings necessary to push back on essentialist accounts of normative identities, [as well as furnish] the fetishizing gaze at transgender bodies, on the other” (Halberstam *Trans** 140). In addition, it is only after meeting Bob the mechanic who goes onto fix the bus when Adam’s lifelong dream can be brought into fruition: climb up a steep incline in complete drag, becoming a “cock in a frock on a rock.” Adam reaches the top as Felicity, his drag persona, effectively aligning him with a female/feminine identity. Like Christine Jorgensen stepping off the plane, Felicity fully becomes Felicity the moment she steps atop the hill, crowning herself the queen of the desert. When the bus breaks down, the act of fixing her becomes an analogy for surgery itself, making Bob the

mechanic a doctor, which can then be viewed in parallel with Buffalo Bill being denied his surgery in *The Silence of the Lambs*. Vehicles breaking down forces surgical crisis points which then must be solved by an outside person; in the case of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, and in *To Wong Foo*, a mechanic must step in and try to fix the car, and subsequently, heal the people who have ridden in the car. But unlike Hannibal in *Silence of the Lambs*, Bob and the mechanic Virgil from *To Wong Foo* both believe that cars can break down and can be fixed without debating the ‘realness’ of the issue at hand. Though Adam and Tick do not identify as transgender/transsexual, each one goes through their own gender journey throughout the course of the film, and the bus being fixed is imperative in making it happen. Adam requires the bus in order to get onto that hill, but his own queer vulnerability is expressed through the bus’s exterior surface; the entire trip across the desert is done for Tick in order to complete a coming out narrative to his wife and family, and to have his son accept him in his drag persona. This last part is important since, as in *To Wong Foo*, the “the death of the patriarchal norm” is rooted in this nuclear family conception (Marchetti 202). Though Tick’s homecoming mirrors earlier trans memoirs, especially of Jorgensen’s, his homecoming is also made trans* as he is accepted by those he cares about in his gender-ambiguous identity/body insofar as they “embrace of the haptic (unknowing)” of who he will end up being beyond the film itself (Halbstaam *Trans** 115-6). Not only does Priscilla the bus allow them to make their journeys, but her broken-down stance becomes a stand-in for the feelings of gender dysphoria that will subsequently be healed through a mechanical action; all of this mirrors the third and fourth stages of Prosser’s steps, effectively book-ending their journey in Prosser’s “archetypal” (101) structure while also providing a rather larger-than-life dance sequence at the end.

While this lack of a gendered narrative ending might seem temporary to some viewers of the film, I view it as part of the sense of “perpetual transition” Halberstam discusses as fundamental to trans* identity and expression (*Trans** 150). The audience may not see the full complete story of these characters, but that does not disavow their claim to any gender embodiment that has been displayed. Bodies in this film are used to convey both the performative elements of gender along with the realities of medical transformation or somatization; the car or tour bus, then, is yet another means used to convey gender through outside artefacts (lavender paint) or mechanical interventions (Bob stating that the bus needs a completely new gas tank). Both bodies and cars are the vehicles used to manifest corporeal and physical change, and cars also become the way in which to adapt the transient real-life feelings of gender dysphoria to the screen. For instance, when Bob asks Bernadette the “64 thousand dollar question” in relation to her gender identity, it is while they are on the road inside the tour bus. The movie goes to a flashback of Bernadette as a child switching Christmas presents with her sister, and then cuts back to her on the road again with Bob, stating that she “had no choice in the matter.” As the only explicitly trans character, Bernadette’s memories and feelings of gender dysphoria literally become trapped by the body of the bus, as they have become trapped inside her. It is also worth noting that after they have fixed the bus, she and Bob the mechanic become romantically involved and stay together by the end of the film. If Bob represents the doctor, he becomes the co-creational partner in accessing her gender; he is one of the only people who can facilitate apotheosis, and create the happy, homecoming for Bernadette as a trans woman—but I wish to stress and emphasize, there is no surgery procedure shown on the screen; nor is there a full body shot in which the visual difference of the trans body is objectified. While gender

difference is presented, it is made into a surface artefact which facilitates travel—a car, a bus—not something meant to deceive or rendered pathetic.

Though *To Wong Foo* skirts the line with the deceptive narrative (especially as they enter the small town after believing that Vida caused a man's death), their struggles on the road are ultimately rendered trans* through their relationship to the larger public world. For instance, when Vida is accosted by a sheriff who finds her penis as he feels under her skirt, the audience is meant to be aligned with Vida. Sheriff Dollard becomes a villain for the rest of the narrative, even as Vida attacks him and the three characters believe they have killed him. Furthermore, when the car breaks down, the three characters take refuge in a small town where their (gender) outlaw status is tested even further. The mechanic necessary to fix their car is Virgil, an abusive man who batters his wife Carol Ann (Stockard Channing). Vida and Virgil antagonize one another, until Vida stands up for Carol Ann and kicks Virgil out. Her victory is short-lived, however, when Noxeema reminds her that they still need Virgil in order to get the car fixed so they can leave. The power dynamics between Vida and Virgil mirrors the more negative aspect of some doctor-trans patient relationships perfectly; the gender ambiguous body is consistently dependent on outside intervention in order to obtain (auto)mobility, and even if violence manifests in these scenarios, there is often no other way around it (Serano *Whipping* 113-122). However, the rejection of Virgil—while it puts the three characters in a precarious and vulnerable state—also manages to facilitate a larger social transformation in the town. With the violent man now gone, the three gender nonconforming characters begin a larger social mission of change through fashion montage makeovers, orchestrating love affairs, and eventually fixing the car for themselves.

Though Joelle Ruby Ryan warns that these helpful acts on the part of the trans* characters can be read as part of the “transgender mammy” trope where the needs of trans people “are completely lost” (167) in favour of cis people, I must disagree—at least a little bit. Vida can easily be seen as a selfless martyr *if not* for the violence that precipitated becoming stranded. The transformation of the town is not done for the cis people who inhabit it, but for the three main characters’ own survival as gender outlaws (especially since they still believe they have murdered the sheriff). Even without this perceived murder, they are still outlaws with gender-ambiguous bodies in a highly vulnerable state, and so Vida, Chi-Chi, and Noxeema only become safer by changing the ideological atmosphere of the town, effectively queering the space rather than normalizing themselves.¹⁵ This occurs through a radical perspective shift—i.e. *To Wong Foo* is about the three gender nonconforming characters, rather than the cisgender folks in the town. Chi-Chi, Vida, and Noxeema do not exist as a side-plot or side characters, much like Rusty does in *Flawless* (whose inclusion in the helper/mammy trope I completely agree with [Ryan 140-170]). Indeed, when Virgil and the sheriff come back to the town and ask for the “drag queens” in order to finish the trans- and homophobic violence started earlier in the film, everyone in the town claims to be a drag queen in order to maintain the newly trans* and queer order. It’s the cisgender people in *To Wong Foo* who change; not the trans and/or gender nonconforming people.

This point is further demonstrated through a scene when Vida is about to come out to Carol Ann, but Carol Ann stops her before she says anything by stating that she already saw Vida’s Adam’s apple. Vida clearly braces for rejection or another form of trans- or homophobic violence, but Carol Ann states that she is “very fortunate to have a lady friend who just happens

¹⁵This can also be an example of “transgender architectonics” insofar as the mainstream life of “the sovereign subject” now becomes shifted “to the acts and collaborations that happens across bodies, buildings, and milieus” (Crawford *Transgender* 14); Crawford’s theory will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter.

to have an Adam's apple." Rather than pretending the physical differences between cis and trans bodies do not exist, the film draws attention to those differences, but ultimately renders them as not important. Vida can be a woman with an Adam's apple; she need not conform to cisgender standards of beauty in order to be a "lady friend" of Carol Ann or "culturally commensurate" (Currah 331). Moreover, the fact that this conversation takes place as they fix the car on their own without Virgil completely undermines the gatekeeping role doctors have played in earlier versions of trans representation. The town, and the three trans* women's rejection of the patriarchal norms, means that Ryan's assessment of these characters existing as mere helpers in this movie is not quite as developed as I would have liked. In addition, the small town was not Vida's, Chi-Chi's or Noxeema's final homecoming or eventual ending to their road trip; they still had a drag competition to attend across the country, and so, in spite of changing the small town for the better, they leave to finish their own journey. This trip was never taken for cisgender people, but solely for their own wants and desires. Tellingly, even when they meet Julie Newmar at the new drag competition, Newmar has no speaking lines. Even though they have been carrying around a framed photo of her as a silent cheerleader on their journey, it was not really about her at all. The cisgender ideal and perspective is cast to the sidelines and instead, the audience is meant to focus on Chi-Chi and her winning crown.

Freedom in Constraint

In *Hit The Road, Jack*, Slethaug attributes the diminishing cultural allure of the road film by the 1980s to recessions and rising oil prices, but he also notes that the mainstream culture's fading fascination is what allowed for the postmodern turn of the 1990s and early 2000s road trip films since now "audiences [could] reconsider who and what earlier road texts had ignored or

suppressed” (Slethaug “Mapping” 35-36). Slethaug’s use of the word “suppressed” is well chosen as it highlights the seemingly contradictory issues at the heart of most road narratives: in order to express the freedom at the road’s core, there often needs to be a way in which that freedom has been suppressed, constrained, or outright ignored in some way. Indeed, many of the single-authored chapters in the rest of *Hit The Road, Jack* deal with issues of marginalization and minorities’ roles on the road. The inherent freedom in American literature and culture can seem contradictory given the country’s racial history (as discussed Cotten Seiler’s chapter on racism and the Green Book [78-98]), the role women played in the Beat movement (99-125), and how sexual and gender minorities have been run off the road itself (Slethaug’s chapter on *Brokeback Mountain* and buddy films [166-197]). As Gina Marchetti describes in her chapter on the film *Transamerica*, having a trans character (such as Bree) behind the wheel and in charge of her own travels allows her to have access to a narrative of freedom that has been historically denied. Marchetti views *Transamerica* as part of a larger genre of queer cinema (in addition to the road film), slotting the 2005 film alongside *My Own Private Idaho*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *Midnight Cowboy*, and *Boys Don’t Cry*. She writes,

Facing the constraints of the heterosexual norm or threats of violence at home, some LGBT people have found themselves on the road throughout American history as explorers, adventurers, prospectors, trappers, hobos, itinerant merchants or performers, hitchhikers, truckers, drifters, or cowboys. [...] If America has always had a romance with the road as part of its pioneer heritage, queer America shares that same romance as a backdrop for a journey of escape, self-discovery, awakening, transcendence, and, occasionally, romantic love. (198).

Marchetti's chapter ultimately posits that by taking part in a road trip across the US, Bree too can be part of this larger queerer America, which then links her with a larger American history. I enjoy Marchetti's reading, but her analysis is conspicuously missing any trans theory or history;¹⁶ this absence, therefore, feels as if it is emblematic of the blind-spot in the academy during the 1990s, and which was still perpetuated (in some regards) when *Hit The Road, Jack* was published in 2012. Nevertheless, I agree with Marchetti's reading, but I would add (and believe it is necessary to add) that the road in *Transamerica* also enables Bree's gender freedom through an engagement with the transsexual plotline as seen in previous memoirs. These memoirs, however, are not the same ones that Aren Aizura and Jay Prosser discuss as travelogues across borders, but rather more modern versions where it is the trek to the city and across/within the same country that Jonathan Ames discusses in his own collection called *Sexual Metamorphosis*. The temporal shift from the memoirs of the 1970s to the 1990s and 2000s is important since it not only expresses a distinct era in trans studies and history, but these memoirs also express gender dysphoria in a completely new manner, partly due to these strong debates, changing diagnostic criteria, as well as the continuing work being done by Prosser, Namaste, and Stryker (among others) in the academy. Though Bree's narrative is not based on a true story, I see her inclusion in the road canon at the end of the "postmodern pastiche" (Slethaug "Mapping" 36) as emblematic of the ways in which the new transgender/transsexual plotline was being told in gender memoirs of the 1990s and early 2000s. The road also makes her gender journey part of the prototypical travel narrative (but one within a country, and not outside of it); much like *To Wong Foo and Priscilla*, Bree spends the bulk of the film in the third stage, thus slowing down her progress and allowing for the gender feelings (of both gender dysphoria and what I will refer

¹⁶ Marchetti has one footnote on Halberstam's "transgender look" from *Queer Time*; she also references Chris Straayer's work, and Butler's work on drag, which again, affirms more of an absence of specifically trans theory rather a presence or awareness of specifically trans issues.

to as gender euphoria later on) to remain visible on the screen. Unlike the previous two road films, however, Bree's plotline can be read as a distinctly transsexual narrative; through casting choices and new cinematic codes, the prototypical 'wrong-body' narrative is now cast into an externalized narrative of a quest which leads to a therapeutic and emotionally transformative experience that both slows down the transition in an act of "temporal drag" (Freeman 5) while also healing the rupture of "gendered plots" (Prosser 9). The road trip film thereby allows Bree to "explore, escape, reinvent, and renew" herself like any other person on the highway, making the road trip itself a great equalizer (Ford and Slethaug 4), and this equalization happens between herself and the cisgender characters, but also between the divides in the trans community that Serano and others have spoken about at length (*Whipping* 133-155; see Patricia Elliot). While not entirely perfect, *Transamerica* represents an important shift in the understanding of trans representation on the screen and how it has affected popular culture.

The first scenes in *Transamerica* are marked by constraint. Bree's financial limitations are made clear as she works a minimum wage job and saves her money. Her gender, too, also becomes a constraint as she surveys the clothing she wears, her reflection, people's looks (and possible perceptions of her), and as she practices lowering her pitch through voice lessons. This last act showcases a training video with Andrea James, a trans woman who works as a voice specialist and who, along with trans actress Calpernia Addams, was consulted for the film (Hopper). Bree's story, from the very first frame, already has an aura of authenticity even without being 'based on a true story' like that of Christine Jorgensen or the much later produced *The Danish Girl*. What "passes as authentic" (Park 478) in *Transamerica* then is the quotidian experience of being a trans woman—but at this particular point in time and in this particular place. *Transamerica* comes out pre-*Time Magazine* "tipping point" announcement, pre-Caitlin

Jenner, and even before Chaz Bono (Steinmetz). Not only is Bree constrained on the screen due to financial immobility, but this constraint is cast outwards towards the culture in which she lives. She is not at fault for the ‘wrong body’ narrative like many previous trans films seemed to imply; the filmic language that once sought to present gender dysphoria on the physical body of the trans character on-screen does not exist in the same manner. Precisely because the story is told from Bree’s point of view, her constraint is presented as external to her and represented in those daily actions of voice lessons and clothing choices; in the surveillance of others and their possible perceptions, rather than the surveillance of her sense of self. Bree’s gender narrative starts in-medias-res, yet it is also not one without history, both in assumed character history but also cultural history. Bree is a trans woman, but this is not a revelation; she need not speak for all trans women; she is one of many; she is “some” as Sandy Stone might say (232). While her someness is good for the overall representation of trans characters in this era, Bree is also not *yet*; her queerness is on the horizon as José Esteban Muñoz might say (1), and so, Bree is not alone—but her narrative is also not yet complete. She is constrained, and one of the many ways this inherent (gender) constraint is presented is through the casting choice of Felicity Huffman.

This casting choice is important to note since, as I stated previously, casting cis actors makes it seem as if the trans person—like their trans role—is temporary. Cis men playing trans women (or drag queens) confuse and muddy the subsequent readings of the film while also demonstrating a stark visual gender difference which tends to privilege the doctor and cisgender people’s perspective on trans people’s lives. The trans characters played by cis actors are then either successes or failures (through a doctor or cisgender cultural gaze) or they are deceptive/pathetic (according to cisgender standards of beauty and normative presentation). When it is Felicity Huffman, a cisgender woman, who is cast as a trans woman in this film,

however, it sends a completely different message rhetorically. Rather than the presentation of gender seeming temporary, it now becomes (or can be seen) as that much more valid because Felicity Huffman will not stop being a woman when the film is over. This casting choice signals to the audience that Bree the character is *already* a woman, and will remain/stay a woman by the end of the film, precisely because the actress who plays her is a woman. Moreover, since the film is about a trans woman, and it is told from her perspective, the casting choice further emphasizes this perspective shift. There is no need to go backwards in time, to start in childhood and with dysphoria like the previous Jorgensen film, in order to demonstrate a gender revelation. The “suffering and confusion” and “the epiphany of self-discovery” (101) of Prosser’s “archetypal” story has already occurred off-screen, and because of this, *Transamerica* contains no flashbacks, dream sequences, or any iteration of Bree as Stanley. There is simply no need to demonstrate a sudden and stark gender transformation from man to woman, because Bree is not at that stage in her identity/journey. From the moment the film starts, Bree is Bree—and Bree is Felicity Huffman. If the previous implicit assumption in the temporary transvestite trope is that having Dustin Hoffman or Robin Williams play a woman is that all trans women are really men in drag, then having a cisgender woman play a trans woman means that there is effectively nothing separating transgender women from cisgender women. *Transamerica*, for this facet alone, makes it remarkably different visually for how it represents the transsexual plotline. Bree’s identity is expressed through her own eyes and from her own perspective while still also acknowledging how restrictive this expression can sometimes become in a larger cisgender world filled with totalizing and normalizing forces. Bree still lives in a world of passing and cisgender beauty ideals—her vocal lessons say as much as do some of her concerns about her clothing and make-up—but the audience is now firmly embedded behind her perspective.

The creation of the therapist character Margaret (Elizabeth Peña) expresses this fundamental perspective shift the most, while also demonstrating the constraints under which Bree lives and will subsequently need to break free from on her journey. When Bree shows up to her therapist's office, she is elated to finally be so close to her final medical goal. After some mundane catch-up with her therapist, Margaret signs the letter allowing surgery but keeps it by her side. It is only when Bree casually mentions the call from her son from a juvenile prison system that Margaret's forthcoming and accepting attitude suddenly disappears. Their entire conversation is worth recording here, especially for how Bree's attitude (and Huffman's acting) suddenly shifts from excitement to desperation; from visible freedom to constraint.

Margaret: Wow. A son.

Bree: An alleged son. It's probably just some scam artist.

Margaret: What is he scamming you for?

Bree: Well, I guess we'll never know. Nothing is going to stop me from checking into that hospital next week. I'm not going to get dragged back into Stanley's old life.

Margaret: Stanley's life is your life. Why don't you get in touch with the mother?

Bree: She's dead. Anyway, he's practically a teen. He's old enough to take care of himself.

Margaret: Bree, this is a part of your body that can't be discarded. I don't want you to go through this metamorphosis only to find out you're still incomplete.

Bree [*a pause*]: What if I visit him later, after my surgery? After I've settled into my new life?

Margaret: When you're ready... [*She trails off and picks up the surgery form*]

Bree: What are you doing?

Margaret: I can't give this to your surgeon right now.

Bree: Yes, you can. Margaret, I can't miss my surgery on Friday. They're booked up a year in advance. [*Nearly in tears*] I'll wire bail money to New York [for the son]. I'll call a social worker... Have someone check in on him. What do you want me to do?

Margaret: Honey, I just want you to be ready.

Bree leaves the office in a huff and visibly shaken. When she eventually goes on the trip, this conversation has already made it clear that it is not because she wants to, but because she must. Bree's "by chance" (Marchetti 201) discovery of her country and herself as the movie goes on is more of a mythic romance placed over something a lot bleaker: her dysphoria, and her therapist's interpretation of this dysphoria. The scene between Margaret and Bree is then reminiscent of many other conversations that trans patients have had with their therapists or doctors, especially when they act as gatekeepers for who is allowed to transition (Serano *Whipping* 110-155; see also Stone, Bornstein, and Namaste). Though Bree has the money, has booked time off work, and has found a doctor who will perform her surgery, Margaret is the only person who stands in her way through her refusal. As cultural critic and trans author Casey Plett has remarked on the film, Bree's characterization becomes faulty due to the proposition that starts the journey; Bree's gender has been shoved into neat little boxes that represent prototypical ideas of male and female, which thereby make her trip seem like an eternal quest marked with "a neon red sign flashing "'VAGINA, VAGINA, VAGINA' She isn't given any other dreams or goals" ("Before you write" Plett). Indeed, as recently as 2015, when the punk singer Laura Jane Grace released her memoir about her gender transition, she recounted similar experiences to

Bree's journey. "I was being treated like a child, back to being a teenager again, trying to justify myself to an authority figure," Grace writes, and then summarizes how she conceded to dressing "in a wig, mascara, and high heels" to appease her therapist so she could obtain hormones (Grace 277). For Grace's therapist, though her appointments happened in 2012, being a trans woman meant desiring femininely and femininity still meant "A-line dress from The Gap and high heels" (277).

I bring this up because I would be remiss if I did not point out how coercive the film makes this narrative structure seem. In some lights, *Transamerica* reduces Bree's characterization to a stereotype of the transsexual plotline (as Plett seems to view it) and forces a gender ambiguous body on the road towards a situation which could very well prove to be dangerous. Though being a gender outlaw does come with a sense of freedom and automobility, it can also be quite precarious. Bree's decision to go on the road should be her own, not an ultimatum with a therapist. Because of this, I am deeply sympathetic to Plett's reading of the film, and can easily make a critical argument against *Transamerica*—but I can also read *Transamerica* as a remarkable adaptation of gender dysphoria on the screen and a valorization of the transsexual archetypal journey which ends in both a homecoming in the body, and a queer restructuring of kinship through the relationship with her son. Because I think retrospectatorship is an active form of reading and rereading certain texts for their trans*/transsexual potentiality, I will argue the latter during the rest of this chapter. In spite of the somewhat haphazard way Bree engages in the gender road narrative and the sometimes coercive presence of Margaret, this journey is still no less important for her life. And in spite of the gatekeeping practices which still exist today, transgender/transsexual people still deserve medical care, attention, and their own ability to access the "freedom, knowledge, and transformation" (Ford and Slethaug 4) that come

with the road—and *Transamerica* offers a representation of that narrative on a larger screen for a mainstream audience.

In this new iteration of the “archetypal” (Prosser 101) and “persistent” (Aizura “Persistence” 139) travel narrative, Bree is not travelling to another country for a doctor to perform surgery, but rather, she is travelling inside her home country in order to find and take back her feelings that she has denied for so long. Therefore, this is a narrative that is fuelled by gender dysphoria—a gender that is difficult to bear—and not a narrative about being trapped in the wrong body. The inherent freedom/transformation of the road film meets with Prosser’s “archetypal” narrative from another angle (101), and becomes an expression of Bree’s dysphoria as externalized through difficult encounters with strangers and the car breaking down and/or being stolen. Much like *To Wong Foo* and *Priscilla* used the “postmodern pastiche” (Slethaug “Mapping” 36) of the road to express an exuberance in gender performance and trans* becomings without a final destination, Bree’s struggles, dysphoria, and general blues are externalized in order for those feelings of despair to be felt and then transformed through travel into euphoria by the end of the journey, rewriting the home of her body and the home of her family life with her son. In this light, I’d still like to examine Margaret as a gatekeeper, but as a therapeutic and not a surgical one. By offloading this role onto her character—and having her appear at both the beginning and ending of this journey—her presence mimics the real-life role a medical/therapeutic professional who can create and facilitate the healing of the gendered plot alongside the transgender/transsexual patient (Prosser 9). Margaret shows up when she is needed by the trans patient; she is the secondary side character in Bree’s own narrative. Margaret also does not go on the road with Bree; Bree does this by herself, for herself, and it is through her solo act of travel where she is allowed to grow, and where the very real feelings of gender

dysphoria become adapted and stretched into the cinematic screen image of the road, which makes each step or drive forward part of the transition itself. Moreover, Margaret's placement in this narrative at this particular point in time pre-dates the official diagnostic language of gender dysphoria, which in turn, makes her focus on feelings even more directly aligned with the way in which the transsexual/transgender community described their lives in their memoirs of this time period.

The term gender dysphoria is relatively new, and did not get added to the DSM-V until 2012 when it replaced Gender Identity Disorder (GID).¹⁷ As Judith Butler and Camille Beredjick document in their work, the change from GID to gender dysphoria was done in order to remove the pathological language ("disorder") which described trans people and implied that there was one right way to be gendered (Butler 77-78; Beredjick). GID's removal is often viewed as similar to the way homosexuality was also removed from the manual in 1977, but it is also quite distinct since GID was removed but then replaced with another term. This replacement with gender dysphoria has been seen as necessary from several perspectives. "[F]rom a legal perspective," as Camille Beredjick writes, "the classification of Gender Identity Disorder is extremely harmful to some trans people, but surprisingly beneficial to others" since having some type of concrete categorization of this particular gender embodiment allows for some trans people who face discrimination to apply for legal assistance; similarly, it was important to keep some diagnostic labelling in order for insurance providers to cover some medical care association with transition for those who wanted it (Butler 75-80). Gender dysphoria, rather than a totalizing term that implies a disordered subject position, works as a way around these problematic terminology while also providing some possible solutions. Though some trans

¹⁷ Previous to the medical concretization of the term, transgender/transsexual people have used some type of equivalent word to express a general feeling which inspires or spurs transition to go forward; gender dysphoria in this more concrete terminology is that feeling Stryker describes in starting from the "unchosen starting place" (*History* 9).

activist circles do not like medicalized language at all (hence the falling out of favour the term ‘transsexual’ as Wilchins notes), Butler and Beredjick both acknowledge that some trans people still want medical care, and therefore, should have better access to it *and* to language in which to describe their experiences in non-pathological ways (Butler *Undoing* 75-101; see Beredjick’s article). Moreover, the term gender dysphoria shifts the perspective onto the patient, their feelings about their gender, which can then facilitates a conversation about the possible solutions; the term itself is the start of healing “the rupture in gendered plots” (Prosser 9).

This history is important to note—abbreviated though it is—because while *Transamerica* pre-dates these official language and diagnostic changes, this discussion about language and pathology had been occurring a long time in both trans and feminist circles (see *Whipping Girl* by Serano and Butler’s full chapter in *Undoing Gender*). The film reflects this trans-centred perspective, that of gender dysphoria, when they cast Felicity Huffman as Bree because this is how Bree views herself. Having a therapist, and not a doctor, with a speaking part (and who does seem to genuinely care about Bree in several scenes) also represents this change. Margaret’s emphasis on Bree speaking her feelings aloud externalizes the wrong body narrative into her confession, not onto Bree’s body; the film seems to suggest visually, in fact, that there is absolutely nothing wrong with Bree’s body at all. Bree is a woman, but it is her feelings are stuck, trapped, and not wholly heard. Though Margaret must be convinced in some way that the surgery is a good idea, her stance (as represented in the conversation quoted earlier) is not that Bree is not a ‘good’ or ‘right’ woman—it is that she must face her past, her relationship to her son, and her feelings about each one of these events. Throughout the therapy session, she does not criticize Bree’s appearance (as previous doctors, such as Benjamin have done in their medical case studies), but she criticizes Bree’s thoughts about herself (especially when she

demands “no third person” as Bree talks about Stanley’s life). As Marchetti notes, “the road trip for Bree (as planned by her analyst) involves her coming to terms with the fact that no operation can erase the past, that she was a man, and that must be part of her identity as a woman” (204). Bree’s internal sense of self through her memories is what is called upon and questioned, but they are not done through an internalized glimpse into a flashback. They are—and only can be done—through an externalized journey on the road.

Transamerica is still the transsexual narrative—especially since Bree’s ultimate goal is to come home into her body and fulfil Prosser’s final stage—but it is the transsexual narrative post-1990s debates in feminism, post-Butler critiques, and post-recommitment to essentialism within trans studies. Since Bree has already had her gender realization, the first two stages of Prosser’s “archetypal” (101) travel narrative become adapted into the role of finding her son (and implied family/home life that offers). Bree’s gender and her feelings for it become externalized through her therapist while the internal struggle of self-realization common in transsexual memoirs is inverted (she must realize her past, not her present and a new future) *and* off-loaded onto the search for her son, especially as she first lies to him about who she is, and he slowly comes to terms with and defends who she is in relation to him. The self-realization narrative of the memoir genre is then turned into a relationship narrative where the two people (in this case, parent and child) now find one another after suffering and confusion, have an epiphany about their roles, move towards social cohesion, and then towards homecoming as a family. Finding a family member on the road is not new; it is much of the basis for Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise’s travels in Jack Kerouac’s *On The Road*; this new focus then situates Bree’s LGBTQ storyline into a larger American story of freedom, and the freedom that can only come from, and be defined through, some sort of “suppression” first (Slethaug “Mapping” 35-6).

Effectively, what the road trip narrative in *Transamerica* does for the prototypical gender journey is enable the transsexual plotline in all its facets, internal *and* external. Instead of an overnight trip which focuses on surgery in a sudden reveal, *Transamerica* presents gender as a day-to-day reality, measured down to quotidian actions such as doing make-up in a mirror, using the women's bathroom, or managing voice lessons. Gender dysphoria—as a feeling, as a repeated image of the “unchosen starting place” (Stryker *History* 9) or the overwrought metaphor of being born in the wrong body—must then become evident through *something other* than a big reveal. Therefore, Bree's trip is dotted with both good and bad experiences, each one an externalized representation of gender dysphoria and then the subsequent alleviation of that dysphoria. There are moments when she is left as a vulnerable body, such as when her son sees her penis as she pees by the side of the road, but other moments where those embodied gender differences do not matter because of social cohesion and acceptance; these are moments when she passes as the woman she longs to be, is accepted by her son, and then defended by him. These are the moments of friendship between her and Calvin Many Goats (Graham Greene), and finally, the euphoric ending of being reunited in the body she has always wanted. The road in *Transamerica* is therefore marked by constraint in order to demonstrate freedom, and then marked by negative experiences (dysphoria) in order to then emphasize the better ones (euphoria). *Transamerica* attempts to represent the whole of the transsexual experience in a cinematic language that is faithful to earlier travel memoirs, but also the late 1990s and early 2000s memoirs being written by other trans writers which put more of an emphasis on the feeling state of gender and the feelings of those they are in relationship with, along with documenting their travel in shorter bursts, such as to the city (see Jonathan Ames and the next chapter for more on the city's role in this era). These memoirs, instead of using fiction like Feinberg did in

order to access the truth, now simply tell the truth as they experience in their bodies, minds, and lives—and as such, also represent a slower narrative, a new type of “temporal drag” where their final homecomings remain intact, but there is not such a rush to get there (Freeman 5). I see Jennifer Finlay Bolan’s memoir *She’s Not There* as the best example of ethos of these newer trans memoirs, but before her was Calpernia Addams’ work, Aleshia Brevard, along with The Lady Chablis’ *Hiding My Candy* and, of course, Kate Bornstein’s *Gender Outlaw*; these trans memoirs begin to change the prototypical form of both the “archetypal” journey (Prosser 101) and the self-realization narrative (Illouz 46-7) by moving beyond the “very revelation of the facts” (Prosser 194) in relation to the self and towards their personal relationships with others. It is not that previous trans memoirs were inferior—not at all. These newer memoirs merely represent the changing shape of the landscape post-feminist debates, but also post-technological changes in publishing. These publishing changes (e-books and self-publishing technology among them) would only speed up and allow for more variations on other trans narratives to emerge, and with them, more focus on the private lives—rather than private parts—of trans life. I will examine these emerging technologies and the next facet of trans life writing and representation in the next chapter, but for now, I only wish to affirm that *Transamerica*’s production and filmic release becomes a strong example of these changes—even if the directors, writers, actors (along with the publishers and cowriters of some memoirs themselves) may not be entirely sure what they were expressing in their works of freeplay adaptation.

Conclusion

Before Noxeema, Vida, and Chi-Chi embark on their road trip, they must decide between taking a Toyota Corolla or a convertible. As Vida states, this is the “age-old dilemma: style... or

substance?” When they pick the convertible, their trip becomes an embracing of the style of the road, which also allows for them to embody the trans* experience of having no solid destination, a “perpetual transition” (Halberstam *Trans** 150). When presented with a similar dilemma from her therapist, Bree makes a difficult choice to turn backwards towards her past to find her son, and in the process, also manages to complete the “archetypal” gender journey (Prosser 101).

Though the 1990s marked a wave of trans representation, these cinematic images were not always well-received, especially when they rendered a trans person as a temporary transvestite, a self-hating drag queen, or as deceptive/pathetic. The road film, however, offers a landscape in which to understand and interpret freedom as well as constraint, euphoria as well as dysphoria, and a diversity of experience of gender rather than one monolithic approach. While remarkably different, *To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything, Julie Newmar!* and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and *Transamerica* all take the “freedom, knowledge, and transformation” (Ford and Slethaug 4) of the road and combine it with the image of the gender outlaw in order to facilitate an overall healing of gender dysphoria through a new kind of automobility in a larger cisgender world. Ultimately, these characters are allowed to exist—or come home—wherever they end up, as long as they ignore adversity and celebrate their ‘larger than life’ stance along the way.

Chapter Four

Trans Sex/Gender and The City:

Reading Trans Autobiography as Romantic-Comedy

Introduction

In Jonathan Ames' *Sexual Metamorphosis: An Anthology of Transsexual Memoirs* (2005), he makes the claim that most trans life writing is framed as *bildungsromans* where the goal for the trans person is to both medically transition and to leave the family home for the city (xii). As I demonstrated in the last chapter with the analysis of *Transamerica* (which came out the same year as Ames' collection), the trans memoir alters its overall structure in the early 2000s and continues to do so today in the era of the "transgender tipping point" (Steinmetz) and thanks to new media technologies. One of the many ways trans life writing has been transformed is through the introduction of social media platforms which allow for the user to broadcast, edit, and be fully in charge of their own representation and stories. YouTube in particular, with its focus on both the confessional shot and the confessional tone, has been one of the main forms of new media which trans people have used to express their personal narratives, especially those stories often prohibited from other normative spaces (Raun 2-3; 102-139; see also Harlow Figa). Episodic YouTube videos changes the narrative structure of the trans memoir, which then allows for a redefinition and reshaping of the "archetypal" (Prosser 101) plotline from decades earlier. These rapid technological and ideological shifts have affected trans representation as a whole, often through adapting "the self-realization narrative" (Illouz 46-47) into an identity plot of some kind (such as *The Danish Girl*). However, as I argue in this chapter, the traditional self-realization plot of trans life writing has also merged with the romantic-comedy genre in several

films in order to facilitate the need for travel and homecoming as seen in the “archetypal” narrative (Prosser 101) and *bildungsroman* (Ames xii), making the rom-com genre, especially one featuring a cis/trans pairing, a faithful and “freeplay adaptation” (Slethaug *Adaptation* 125-7) of the memoir genre even in the rapidly changing technological landscape and socio-political sphere.

In this chapter, I examine several romantic comedies with trans/cis pairings in order to demonstrate the overall “transgender architectonics” of these stories as each narrative shifts the sense of trans identity from “the sovereign subject to the acts and collaborations that happens across bodies, buildings, and milieus” (Crawford *Transgender* 14). What this means is that the comedy genre now bears the symbolic weight and typical narrative trajectory of the “archetypal” (Prosser 101) trans story, while the trans character in these romantic pairings is now tasked with a different kind of “self-realization narrative” (Illouz 46-7). It is the very *structure* of these rom-coms which can now be considered “trans” *along with* the places the characters (cis and trans alike) inhabit (Crawford *Transgender* 14-15). In particular, I focus on how the 2014 romantic comedy *Boy Meets Girl* positions the trans protagonist Ricky in a “self-realization narrative” (Illouz 46-7) through her confessional style YouTube videos and ultimate goal to leave her hometown for fashion design in New York City. In doing so, the film shifts the transsexual plotline to her career and goals, but does so without disregarding the importance of trans embodiment. Since the conclusion to Ricky’s romance with her childhood friend Robby and her self-realization plot surrounding her fashion career both engage with travel and social cohesion, the entire structure of *Boy Meets Girl* becomes further trans-ed since it allows for Jay Prosser’s conception of the trans homecoming to be rooted in both physical body *and* physical space. In this construction, the tensions between the country/city and cis/trans are interrogated and

overcome through the romance, which turns the trans filmic body that has been a site of the “dangerously dysphoric” (Halberstam *Trans** 143) into a space of healing, potential, and community acceptance along with the small town where both protagonists have met. Both of these final stances thus work to reverse previous filmic iterations of both trans and southern bodies as deceptive/pathetic (Serano *Whipping* 40-44) or grotesque (Yaeger xi-xii).

Similarly, I examine the 1999 lesbian romantic comedy *Better Than Chocolate* for its secondary side plot romance between the cisgender bookstore owner Frances (sometimes spelled as Francis) and trans woman Judy. Rather than travelling to the city, the film begins there; by doing so, the film offers a layered trans architecture of the city, which informs Judy’s plot as well as everyone else’s in their community. Judy and Frances’s relationship also interrogates the notion of homecoming and belonging through an exploration of queer intimate space shared by two communities that have not seen eye to eye in the past: radical lesbian separatist movement and trans women who are often relegated to the sidelines. The happy ending of *Better Than Chocolate*, where Frances and Judy maintain their differences rather than flatten them for approval, allows for a new mapping of the city landscape and the romantic locations which shape relationships (including the happily ever after in the marriage home). Ultimately, I argue that both *Boy Meets Girl* and *Better Than Chocolate* present emotionally faithful freeplay adaptations of the self-realization narratives common in trans life writing projects (from traditional memoirs to YouTube), but by using the genre of the romantic comedy, these plots also allow for a mainstream genre like romantic comedies to be trans-ed through reading and interpreting practices (Crawford *Transgender* 14), which can, at its best, start reshaping a better and queerer horizon.

The Romantic Lens

Boy Meets Girl is a 2014 romantic comedy written and directed by Eric Schaeffer. The main story line focuses on Ricky, a trans woman living in a small Kentucky town, who longs to leave for fashion school in New York City. She works as a barista during the day and makes YouTube videos in her spare time, mostly involving fashion advice and featuring the clothing she has sewn herself. Her best friend since childhood, Robby, ends up becoming her love interest by the end of the narrative, though she does also have a relationship with a cisgender woman named Francesca who comes into town to visit with her fiancé David and his family before getting married. David is a soldier and away for the bulk of the narrative, but when he returns, his former relationship with Ricky is also alluded to. The film is a standard romantic comedy in its use of genre conventions (such as the “meet cute” [Doherty 25]; conflict through miscommunication/misunderstanding, reunion and recognition [Booker 107-131]; the small town location, and a mysterious stranger; see Janice Radway for more on conventions). Eric Schaeffer has also written and directed other films within the rom-com genre. Indeed, it would not be odd to see a movie like *Boy Meets Girl* on the Hallmark Channel with how standardized its overall structure is—except that, of course, *Boy Meets Girl*’s main lead is a trans woman who dates both men and women, which is not exactly standard Hallmark Channel fare (Nguyen). While *Boy Meets Girl* is a romantic comedy in its form and structure, it is definitely not a standard heterosexual narrative in its content. It also isn’t the first romantic comedy with transgender/transsexual characters.

Many of the films I have discussed so far in this dissertation have involved love stories or trans people pursuing a love interest. *The Danish Girl*, for instance, is as much about the relationship between Lili and Gerda as it was about Lili’s transition; *Boys Don’t Cry* was

criticized by some scholars for its “wishful construction of a lesbian romance” (Cvetkovich 276) rather than being a story of transition; Fergus and Dil from *The Crying Game* are another romantic couple, while Bree and Calvin in *Transamerica* also seem to have a romantic spark. *Normal*, a 2003 HBO film which also utilizes similar themes of romance and small towns as *Boy Meets Girl*, follows the late-in-life coming out story of Ruth Applewood (Tom Wilkinson), and her story involves her wife and their love/family in numerous ways as well. These films, while they contain romantic relationships, are not romances—or comedies—in the slightest. Many of the couples in these love stories do not end up together and sometimes the break up is quite violent and traumatic, such as *The Danish Girl* and *Boys Don’t Cry*. For those that do end up together, such as HBO’s *Normal*, the overall structure of the plot has far more in common with the “self-realization narrative” (Illouz 46-7) as expressed through a coming out storyline—or what Amy Hungerford might call also an “identity plot”—rather than a narrative solely focused on romance (Hungerford, “Lecture 14”). Even *Different For Girls*, a 1996 film which was marketed as a romance and features a cis/trans couple, still functions more along the lines of an identity plot where it is Prentice, the cis lead—and not Kim, his trans woman girlfriend—who is discovering something about himself. As a viewer, when it comes to ask what these trans characters want in these films, trans cultural critic Casey Plett has summarized as such: “a neon red sign flashing ‘VAGINA, VAGINA, VAGINA’” rather than belonging, community, or even love and romance as defined by the genre conventions (“Before you write”).

When I speak of “romance” or “comedy” or “rom-com” in this sense, then, I draw from the classical plot of Comedy that literary scholar Christopher Booker documents in his work. In its most basic structure, Comedy is a narrative where there is “conflict between two characters or groups of characters. One is dominated by some dark, rigid, life-denying obsession. The other

represents life, liberation and truth. The issue is ultimately decided, of course, in favour of the latter” (108); in later iterations of this plot (post-Greek Comedies), these light and dark forces are often represented through a romantic union (107-111). This structure matters because, as I argue in the rest of the chapter, the reunion at the end of the comedy (a triumph of “life, liberation, and truth” *through* a couple in love) works in a very similar manner to the “*social transformation/conversion*” and the narrative homecoming at the end of Prosser’s archetypal understanding of trans narratives (101; emphasis mine). In effect, the rom-com genre has rich potential for “transgender architectonics” and new ways of reconfiguring trans embodiment inside particular spaces and structures (including genre structures)—but only if the writers/directors/producers and others involved in these films understand the nuances of trans life and the ways in which it can be adapted to the screen *within* this particular generic “blueprint” (Crawford *Transgender* 14).

One of the ways in which *Boy Meets Girl* differs from these previous iterations of the cis/trans rom-com (or love story) is that Ricky is already out as a trans woman by the beginning of the film. Though there is a flashback sequence where the audience witnesses her as a young child “seven years earlier” Ricky is ostensibly already out as trans. In the flashback, she wears a pink top, has long hair, and wears make-up; in another flashback much later on in the film, she dresses as a princess during Halloween. These flashbacks are not used to frame her gender reveal or gender dysphoria; they are there to provide context to the relationship between herself and Robby. Like Bree from the previous chapter, Ricky is Ricky from the start of the film, and her childhood is not made distinct through depictions of past trauma like the young Christine in *The Christine Jorgensen Story*. Ricky is already trans, and so there is no need for a discovery or coming out plotline so common in other films with trans characters (especially only one trans

character);¹⁸ Ricky knows who she is and so do the people around her, including Robby, who has been by her side since she was “six years old” as these flashbacks demonstrate. Moreover, since *Boy Meets Girl* is also told from Ricky’s perspective, there is no need to mark her as different *visually*. Ricky’s gender presentation is not over the top feminine or failing in its femininity; there is no need for the deceptive/pathetic trope (Serano *Whipping* 40-44) because her identity is not supposed to be hidden for any reason, including in her flashbacks. So while the similar rom-com *Different For Girls* also opens with a flashback of the trans woman Kim as a young child, it is remarkably different in the use of the flashback than in *Boy Meets Girl*. In the *Different For Girls* scene, Kim is in the showers at her boarding school and is teased by the boys; a cis male actor plays her and the scene is presented as a way to establish the visual difference between the young Kim and the current Kim (as played by Steven Mackintosh). While Kim remains Kim in her adult form for the entire film, and the film gets some of the language for trans representation correct (at least in 1996’s terms), the film presents gender dysphoria and the trans body as “dangerously dysphoric” (Halberstam *Trans** 143) and from the cis partner’s perspective only. In this light, Kim’s body becomes a way in which her love interest, a former childhood friend named Prentice, subsequently works out his own feelings about gender over the course of the movie. This is especially salient since the bullying sequence that opens the film is stopped by (young) Prentice, and is then mirrored much later on when they are both arrested and Kim is sexually propositioned by a police officer and Prentice must save her. It is Kim’s trauma and her visible gender variance which sparks the initial romance between them; it is Prentice stepping in to help Kim; and it is her gender dysphoria which ultimate seals their romantic union. *Different*

¹⁸Tom Léger of Topside press has noted that when there is only one trans character, they can easily become the token figure, so he created something he dubbed the “Topside Test” (named after his publishing company) and which works on a similar level to the Bechdel test to see if a film/book/media has enough trans characters and that they are not solely defined through that neon sign Plett alludes to. See the reference list and Léger for more.

For Girls, though it uses many of the same tropes of the romantic comedy genre as *Boy Meets Girl*, still situates the trans body as something the cisgender lover must discover and deal with over the course of the narrative. It is a film far more about Prentice than it ever was about Kim, even though the film opens with a flashback sequence where she is the focal point.

The fact that Ricky is already Ricky as *Boy Meets Girl* begins is then worth noting and comparing to other films within the genre (of both trans films and the subgenre of trans rom-coms) since it works to reshape the dynamic of trans representation *and* gender within Comedy. Before going on, I think it is important to note that Comedy often utilizes the temporary transvestite a fair amount (as documented in the previous chapter; *To Wong Foo* and *Priscilla* can easily fall under Booker's Comedy categorization, though I would argue that both are also more dominantly a Quest structure due to the road narrative [see 69-87]). The main reason why the temporary transvestite trope appears within Comedy more than any other genre is that the early classical structure of Comedy used "familiar sources of misunderstanding" in order to generate "general chaos" which then facilitated recognition, restoration of order, and "universal relief" as good triumphs over ill fortune (Booker 107-8). Some of the most common ways to do that were to have:

- characters donning disguises or swapping identities;
 - *men dressing up as women, or vice versa*;
 - secret assignations when the 'wrong person' turns up;
 - scenes in which characters are hastily concealed in cupboards or behind furniture, only for their presence to be inevitably and embarrassingly discovered.
- (107; emphasis mine).

This temporary gender-swapping structure began with the Greeks, but it was finessed and developed over time (Booker notes that Comedy's history is one of the best documented [107]), making notable appearances in Shakespeare's Comedies and then through our popular film and media (110-115). Gender-as-disguise became a citational freeplay adaptation meant to signal general confusion without a necessary source text; writers, directors, and producers may not have known why they repeated this trope, only that it seemed stock and trade of the genre. While the temporary trope is harmful to gender nonconforming and trans people, and it should be retired in modern Comedies, I would like to note that advocating for this prohibition does not mean that trans people should not be in Comedies. I am merely arguing that the structure of whatever Comedy a trans character participates in then must give them agency and embodiment while still providing the overall plot points of confusion *and* revelation. Indeed, I see the confusion and revelation inherent in the Comedy genre as akin to Prosser's first, second, and third stages of the trans narrative (101); and so the romance genre (as Comedy is most often represented in today [Booker 113]), when it involves a trans person as the lead, or one of the main leads, becomes rich with potential for exploration and innovation without necessarily forgoing all sensitivity to trans embodiment and identity. Indeed, this is precisely what I will argue with Ricky and Robby's romance, along with Judy and Frances in this chapter. So unlike many films featuring trans protagonists released since *Transamerica* in 2005, *Boy Meets Girl* does *not* use the typical LGBTQ coming out plotline in order to construct the conflict and resolution; it uses the romantic genre to facilitate those conflict and resolution points, and instead shifts the self-realization narrative that is so often part of trans life writing to another goal entirely. Rather than Ricky's sole focus being on obtaining any kind of medical care to further her transition, or discovering that gender in the first place, she is focused on fashion and design school. Discovering her

gender identity now becomes sublimated into a search for purpose in life, inner meaning, and occupation. Ricky is not chasing gender, but chasing a dream—and she does so right from the first frame of the film: the initial flashback where Ricky is a young girl. This first flashback is actually a video of Ricky that she eventually posts on YouTube; it is her first official chapter in her YouTube memoir, and it is a video which ultimately orients Ricky’s goal of fashion design around her mother’s missing approval.

In this first YouTube video, young-Ricky holds up cue cards to tell her story to her then-invisible audience (since she does not yet release this video until the end of the film, but instead keeps it in a folder on her desktop that reads ‘Mom’). The first few cue cards read as follows: “I have a past. I have secrets. This is my mother. [She holds a photo of her mother with her as a young baby] Wasn’t she beautiful?” After these, the movie cuts to the “Now” of the present-day with Ricky working at a coffee house where Robby hangs out on the sidelines. Soon Francesca, her first romantic partner of the film, walks in, and Ricky shares with Francesca the dress designs she has made. Later on in the film, the messages on the cue cards shift in tone as Ricky narrates more of her gender story, though still ostensibly framed around her mother in this video: “She never liked that I turned into a girl. She never said it, but I knew. That’s why she left us. I’ve thought of killing myself before. I never tell anyone. I just smile and pretend that everything is fine.” The last few cards—which are not visible until the concluding scenes of the movie and function in part to facilitate a miscommunication between herself and Robby—now resolve all the conflicting threads. These cards read as such:

But then I think of my little brother. My father. Who would take care of them if I was gone? And I think of all the things I love besides my family too. And I realize how lucky we all are to be alive. No matter what our circumstances are. So please

write me if you ever feel down and think of hurting yourself. And I'll remind you of what you forgot. That you are perfect in every way sweet boy! Or girl!

Ricky's first YouTube video acts as a confessional space; it is the place where "truth and sex are joined, through the obligatory and exhaustive expression of an individual secret" in the form of a confession to someone in a higher authority (Foucault *Sexuality* 67-8). Even if Ricky does not release this video just yet, the titling of the folder as "Mom" on her computer conjures her hopeful audience as her mother, especially since the last words in the video are a derivation of a song her mother used to sing to her (but obviously could not make the gender change in the lyrics before leaving). The titling of the folder "Mom" also calls out to an audience just like Ricky: forgotten children who have had parents abandon them. The vlog may start out as a private diary not meant for anyone else, but it soon becomes a confession which requires an audience, which then enables it to become part of Ricky's autobiography, a story where she creates herself and then tells to herself, in order to finally change the words of the song her mother sung to her.

Building on Foucault's notions of confession in Western culture, sociologist Eva Illouz posits the term "self-realization narrative" (Illouz 46-7) or "therapeutic narrative" (Illouz 47) in order to classify the secular version of the former religious confession. In her work, she explains how an entire industry of autobiography, memoir, and self-help has flourished around this narrative form. She writes that

[a]s in religious narratives, everything in the therapeutic narrative has hidden meaning and purpose. In the same way that human miseries are explained by the assumption of a hidden divine plan, in the therapeutic narrative the choices that seem detrimental to us serve some hidden need and purpose. It is here that

narratives of self-help and suffering connect for, if we secretly desire our own misery, then the self can be made directly responsible for alleviating it. (47).

It is this last part, where the authority to relieve the suffering is shifted onto the sufferer, rather than a Divine God or other authority, which changes the narrative's outcome and its overall purpose. The self of the self-realization narrative is then the one who causes the suffering, yet this is a relief since it means the self is ultimately responsible for overcoming it. This structure is precisely what the audience sees with Ricky's video. In spite of lamenting her mother's loss and Ricky suffering guilt for her belief that she caused it, it is not her mother who solves the problem of her misery, but Ricky performing the motherly duties herself. She acts as a guide for others ("So please write me") along with changing the gender in the song ("Or girl!"). While her YouTube channel acts as another day-to-day diary she shares with others as she gets older, it is not a wholly transition diary as many other YouTube channels are (Raun 5-7; see also Harlow Figa). Her self-realized goals are not wholly gender/transition oriented, yet she still engages with a medium that is known for its trans spaces and audiences, thereby aligning her story with other trans people's. Her quest to go to New York City for the school still mirrors the quest to the city for medical transition, yet she fundamentally reworks this structure by no longer having/needng institutional approval in order to complete these missions. Moreover, the film does not end with her school accepting her—she is actually rejected—but she still leaves her hometown with Robby, and thus completes her bildungsroman. She releases her final YouTube video regardless of institutional approval (including her mother's approval, since *Boy Meets Girl* does not contain a reunion scene in this respect), and in doing so, opens up a narrative space for herself and others just like her. Rather than conceding that her mother/someone else had power all along, Ricky is firmly in charge of her life narrative, much like current trans YouTubers (Raun 140-170). The

release of her first YouTube clip at the end of the film also performs the final ending of the self-realization narrative since, as Illouz notes, these are narratives “written backwards” after the solution has been solved (52). Unlike *The Christine Jorgensen Story* where the audience sees the backwards iteration of the self-realization narrative through trauma and dysphoria, the audience of *Boy Meets Girl* witnesses the clip and then its release alongside Ricky as she grows and changes. Indeed, it is YouTube itself which finally facilitates a faithful adaptation of the trans memoir to the screen, since it allows for the “formative principle” of time in the written word to become the “formative principle” of space in film through the computer screen confessional, which can then be embedded into the larger cinema screen itself (Bluestone 60-1). Ricky’s story in *Boy Meets Girl* is not true in the sense that Christine Jorgensen’s film adaptation was, but the actress playing Ricky (Michelle Hendley) *is* a trans woman, and moreover, director Eric Schaeffer found Hendley on YouTube and cast her for the film from there (Giacobbe). Not only is Hendley the right person to play Ricky because she actually is trans, but she fulfills her own self-realization narrative alongside the fictitious character she’s playing using YouTube. Though *Boy Meets Girl* is not based on a true story, there is an added sense of what “passes as authentic” for this storyline precisely because of this casting choice, the film’s reliance on YouTube, and the confessional style the movie opens up with through the young Ricky and her cue cards (Park 473-83).

City/Country, Cis/Trans

Though Ricky’s self-realization narrative in *Boy Meets Girl* is not necessarily hinged around gender identity or transition, it does not mean that her trans embodiment is forgotten. She openly speaks about her trans status to Robby, who has been on her side since she was “six years

old”; she also continues to remind Francesca about her physical differences, such as when Francesca asks Ricky for a tampon (and Ricky does not have one), or when the two of them discuss certain limitations to clothing they can both wear. The fact that Ricky maintains that she is not exactly like Francesca invokes—and then alleviates—the spectre of autogynephilia which haunts each lesbian trans relationship and its representation on-screen (Serano *Outspoken* 185). As I discussed in Chapter Two, the autogynephilic trans woman is assumed to be attracted to an idealized version of herself as a woman, and therefore, is often not seen as a “true” transsexual (Serano *Outspoken* 162-187). As Julia Serano summarizes, the term was created in the late 1980s by psychologist Ray Blanchard when he “took the psychological sexualization of trans femininities to new heights” by claiming

that transsexual women come in two (and only two) subtypes, each with a distinct etiology (or cause). Blanchard refers to the first of these subtypes as “homosexual transsexuals,” who are conceptualized as being feminine from a very early age, attracted exclusively to men as adults, and who supposedly never experience cross-gender arousal. Proponents of the theory often depict transsexual women belonging to this group as a type of feminine gay man who ultimately transitions to female in order to attract heterosexual men. [...]The second subtype according to Blanchard’s scheme are “autogynephilic transsexuals,” who are essentially viewed as a type of heterosexual man who, typically around puberty, begins to experience cross-gender arousal in response to imagining themselves as women. Blanchard argued that this cross-gender arousal is a paraphilia and that it eventually becomes the primary factor that drives these individuals to physically transition to female later in life. (181-2).

In Blanchard's construction, he conflates gender identity and sexuality, and therefore implies that "all transsexual women are sexually motivated in their transitions" which then produces two stereotypes which are repeated over and over again in media: "the gay man who transitions to female to seduce unsuspecting straight men and the male deviant who transitions to fulfill some kind of bizarre sex fantasy" (Serano *Outspoken* 181-2). This categorization is wrong; Serano and numerous trans women have found flaws in Blanchard's scientific data as well as his broader ideological assumptions about femininity and trans women as a whole. Yet the autogynephilic label is still sometimes used to this day, and it can be deeply upsetting to those who it affects, while also prohibiting some trans women from receiving proper medical treatment (Serano *Outspoken* 162-187; Truit). In addition, the autogynephilic assumption made by the medical community has migrated outwards into the culture and stoked the already-brewing fires of divide and difference within lesbian and feminist communities, which means that trans women often become excluded from these spaces as well as using certain identity markers (Serano *Outspoken* 209-219). Though autogynephilia was not a distinct term when Janice Raymond wrote *The Transsexual Empire* in the 1970s, the term's use now conjures the same fear since it splits trans womanhood into real/fake and true/false, much like Raymond claimed. Raymond's work, and Sandy Stone's removal from Olivia Records in the same era, are two events which split the lesbian community down the middle (Stryker *History* 101-3)—but these divides continued with the contentions around Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MichFest for short). As Serano documents in *Whipping Girl*, MichFest became the locus for even more debates surrounding the real/fake women divide when they publicized and enforced their "womyn-born-womyn" policy in the early 1990s, which prohibited trans women from entering the grounds in order to keep it a women-centered and safe space (52-53). In effect, the policy stated that trans women (especially

pre-operative trans women) had “male energy” and penises which would be a “symbol of male oppression and have the potential to trigger women who have been sexually assaulted or abused by men” (52). The 1999 romantic comedy film *Better Than Chocolate* addresses these debates surrounding MichFest, autogynephilia, and whose feelings counted in this era on-screen through the cis/trans romantic pairing of Frances and Judy, and through the cisgender lesbian couple Kim and Maggie.

Better Than Chocolate's main romantic couple is Maggie (Karen Dwyer) and Kim (Christina Cox) and their story oscillates around Kim's struggles to survive as an artist while Maggie deals with her mother and brother's sudden reappearance in her life, which means she must now come out as a lesbian; it is the “identity plot” (Hungerford “Lecture 14”) and “self-realization narrative” (Illouz 46-7) as combined with romance. Meanwhile, the secondary romance between Frances the butch bookstore owner (who is being prosecuted for proliferating obscene literature) and Judy, a trans woman trying to reconnect with her family, offer a new form of trans architecture by combing the romance narrative with differing notions of space, safety, and homecoming. Instead of ending this romantic narrative with a quest to the city (as common in the *bildungsroman*), the film begins in the city, and in doing so, enables the “the sovereign subject to [...act within] collaborations that happens across bodies, buildings, and milieus” (Crawford *Transgender* 14). The ultimate task of Judy's homecoming narrative is not to travel, then, but to reshape the current community and find new ways of inhabiting the city space as a trans person, especially as a trans woman and lesbian among the cis women of *Better Than Chocolate* who exist in a lesbian community that is not always wholly accepting (and which cinematically represent the same battles that have been going on in the lesbian community since the 1970s). I then see Judy's character creation, and the way in which she also inhabits a unique

kind of trans geography in the big city, as a freeplay adaptation of these socio-political issues, one where screenwriter Peggy Thompson gives her a happy ending, along with the butch lesbian Frances, as a way to heal/mend these divided and divisive community issues.

At the start of the film, Judy dances alongside Maggie at the lesbian club The Cat's Ass. While both characters are in over the top make-up and costumes for the sake of performance, Maggie wears an angel costume and Judy's attire is adorned with devil horns. On first glance, it appears as if the standard conflation of the 1990s that "gay = drag = transsexual" (Ryan 169) is being made through the film's use of certain cinematic codes, and through their casting of a cis actor in Judy's role (Peter Outerbridge). Moreover, Maggie's cisgender ideals become represented through the angel costume she wears; she is the only good gender while Judy is the imitator, the bad gender, the devil with "male energy" in a sacred female space (Serano *Whipping* 52-3). The film short-circuits these readings, however, by having Judy take the stage by herself in order to perform a song entitled "I'm Not A Fucking Drag Queen." Though the title is fairly obvious at what Judy's character pushes against, the lyrics summarize quite well the same misunderstandings between drag culture, gay men, and transsexual/transgender women as well as the incisive debates among trans and lesbian feminists. Unlike the somewhat haphazard freeplay adaptation in *To Wong Foo*, those involved with *Better Than Chocolate* manage to encapsulate both the confusion of the crowd trying to interpret gender performance in the late 1990s and the emotional perspective of someone caught up in those misapprehensions when Judy sings, "When you say Good Day Sir / You stab me all the way through / my tender transgender heart." With a simple chorus, Judy manages to articulate the trans woman's dilemma within popular and some queer/LGB culture, and then present a cogent response to it. "I'm Not A Fucking Drag Queen" addresses the critical issue of reading (and misreading)

gender, but also provides answers as to how to ameliorate these issues: “Miss Squires will do nicely” is another lyric which addresses how Judy wants to be known, in addition to correcting the misgendering she experiences. Off stage, Judy uses the up-to-date terminology of trans experience, and situates herself as a distinctly trans woman who is interested in women. This last point is critical because of these previous autogynephilic assumptions in medical literature and within the lesbian community. Judy is not a trans woman because she loves the idea of herself as a woman (the autogynephilic reason); Judy is a trans woman because she is a woman, and she also happens to be a lesbian as well. These are distinct categories, and this distinction is made clear within the film through several conversations Judy has with those in the lesbian community (like Kim and Maggie) and outside the community (like Maggie’s mother Lila). Judy’s character is positioned in the middle of two sometimes contentious minority communities, but she is also given agency and voice in a broader social world. She is not a symbol and her story is not something to be sold to the tabloids (which is what happens to Kim in *Different For Girls*) or sold out as a mere performance with no substance (a reading that can be done to the gender nonconforming characters in *To Wong Foo*). Judy is present and takes up space as a trans woman *and* as a lesbian.

Judy is accepted as a lesbian by those around her (Frances, Maggie, and Kim), but the film makes it clear that not all lesbians accept her, and those who do not accept her often align themselves with MichFest’s overall values. These issues of identity and acceptance become represented in the highly charged space of the women’s bathroom. When Judy goes to use the bathroom after her performance, she is accosted by a lesbian who has watched the show. After mocking her in the mirror as Judy does her make-up (the other woman makes kissing noises while Judy puts on lipstick; see figure 11), she tells Judy that she is a man and therefore, does not

belong here. The ‘here’ is ambiguous as much as it is definitive; Judy does not belong in the women’s bathroom, but the woman’s tone also hints Judy may also not belong in the larger club—a microcosm for the lesbian community—as a whole. The scene grows tenser and tenser as Judy does not relent; the woman throws what’s left of her drink in Judy’s face, and then beats her with a purse. Interspersed with these acts of violence are scenes of Kim and Maggie holding one another on the dance floor, perfectly content and happy. Not only does this scene articulate a common problem within the trans community (“the bathroom problem” as Halberstam has documented in *Female Masculinity* [22] and *Trans** [152-3]; see others like Heath Fogg Davis and Dean Spade who have also spoken of the real-life issues surrounding bathrooms), but it represents this issue as existing inside a larger minority community. While Kim and Maggie are safe and content, Judy is not. Other conflicts and antagonists in the film have existed *outside* the LGBTQ community (such as Maggie’s mother’s microaggressions, a homophobic pizza owner, and skinheads outside the Cat’s Ass Club). The people causing the problems thus far in the film have been white, cisgender, and straight; they are heteronormative to the extreme. But this threat against Judy is not from someone so ostensibly different: it is coming from inside the community, from inside the space of the lesbian/queer club. It is exactly like Michigan Womyn’s Festival defining who is allowed to be a woman, and therefore, who they will allow into a sacred space.



Figure 11: Judy in the bathroom in *Better Than Chocolate*.

Credit: screenshot taken by author (Distributor: Trimark Pictures).

Moreover, the scene is not played for maudlin violence, nor as a way to pity the trans person, as is often done in other common abuse scenes in previous films, like another bathroom confrontation scene in the HBO film *Normal* or the beginning shower bullying scene in *Different For Girls*. Instead, there are large sections of violence missing from Judy's ordeal; the scene cuts from the first drink in the face to Maggie and Kim dancing, and then back to Judy cowered in a corner from the woman hitting her with her purse. The film does not shy away from the realities of being trans in this type of space (a facet that Halberstam notes is important for the especially violent scenes in *Boys Don't Cry* [*Trans** 120-122]), but the film also does not linger in this traumatic depiction. When Kim and Maggie enter the bathroom, Kim grabs the woman, forces her to apologize, while Maggie makes sure that Judy is okay. Maggie also reiterates that Judy is a woman and deserves to be in the bathroom. "And she's our friend," Maggie adds. This line seems more important than Maggie's insistence on Judy's femininity since Judy has already argued for her own gender; it's not individual identity that is then emphasized, then, but a specific tie of kinship, friendship, and community values. This emphasis is especially important

given that the happy scene which preceded it—Kim and Maggie dancing—was underscored by unseen violence. Kim and Maggie’s actions affirm that if they had known this was going on in their community, they would have stopped it sooner. As a quick final note to this scene, while it is Kim who forces the woman to apologize, it is Judy who reasserts that she’d like to hear “I’m sorry, *ma’am*” rather than just an apology. Though Kim is the one to initial spur authorship of the apology (one which, in Judy’s fear, she says is okay to forget about), Judy eventually takes over authorship and claims what she wants to hear, like she’d once sung on the stage. Judy’s actions mirror her chorus; she is “not a fucking drag queen” but a woman, a friend, and she deserves to be in this community and take up space inside of it. Since Judy—like Ricky—already knows who she is, the “suffering and confusion” (Prosser 101) of the previous transsexual narrative is now set against the suffering and confusion within the tumultuous lesbian community.

The stages of suffering and confusion also shift onto the romance genre through the cis/trans union of lesbian partners in *Better Than Chocolate*. Up until this point in the film, Judy’s romantic interest Frances has been evading Judy’s advances, usually giving excuses that her bookstore requires her attention because it is undergoing prosecution. After Judy is attacked, however, both women come together and leave the club for Frances’s apartment. Rather than the act of violence stoking pity in Frances, it seems to provide the same act of clarity it does for Kim and Maggie. Frances has always wanted to be with Judy, but she’s shy and unsure; in private, she confesses that she’s “only had three girlfriends and they’ve all been like me.” Her comment of “like me” conjures the idea of autogynephilia (like Francesca does with Ricky), but Judy—like Ricky—shifts the entire dialogue elsewhere. Judy responds quickly with “I am like you”—but then changes the entire discourse community when she adds, “I like Gertrude Stein. Not even

just the readable Stein.” This line is brilliant for many reasons. “I am like you. I like Gertrude Stein” implies autogynophilia, since Stein was a lesbian, and in many ways, Frances’s character seems to be modelled after her. Frances is butch, owns a bookstore, and seems to be the hub of the lesbian community; she acts a lot like Stein in Paris. By invoking Stein, lesbian sameness is implied, which then conjures autogynophilia in Judy’s insistence to be just like Frances—but Judy’s next line “not just the readable Stein” completely obliterates this meaning. Stein was known for her stream-of-consciousness writing and her modernist experiments; without going too deep into the career and life’s work of the author, I think it’s important to note that her more famous works—*The Making of Americans* and *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*—are not “readable” insofar as they either employ long passages without breaks and faulty punctuation (*The Making of Americans*) or they are not wholly comprehensible since they employ a shaky representational relationship to the truth (*Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is clearly not an autobiography at all). Stein is difficult to comprehend and fully appreciate, especially since her lesbian identity most likely obscured some of her fame and recognition. Her work is important and monumental—but it is also extremely niche, both in its form (modernist, experimental) and content (perceived queerness due to her identity). None of this matters, though, to Frances the lesbian bookstore owner. She embodies Gertrude Stein—and so does Judy, but for very different reasons. It is precisely because Judy and Frances are so alike, yet so different, that makes their romance work out on-screen.

Gertrude Stein also fits within a trans architectural space. As Lucas Crawford notes in *Transgender Architectonics*, there is a particular kind of “transing” that goes on in modernist space, and though he does not directly analyze Stein’s work in his 2013 title, much of what he writes about Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* can be applied to Stein’s oeuvre (Crawford *Transgender*

15-6; 67-87). Stein can then be seen as unreadable in another way—a trans way—and so, of course, Judy understands Stein. No matter how we read these sentiments, Judy and Frances’ conversation pushes back against autogynephilia and the womyn-born-womyn notion by not caring about standard, accepted readability at all. In addition, Judy is not concerned with being “readable” in this private space; their romantic homecoming need not remain fixed to specific bodies and the identity labels they represent, nor do they need to be completely the same, in order for their romantic relationship to flourish. While there is a kiss that the two characters share, there is no unveiling of a body or demonstration of a love scene (not like there is for Maggie and Kim, or other cis/trans pairs in some love stories or romances). I view this decision on part of the filmmakers to avoid the big reveal scenes common in trans representation in this time period, but to also give the characters their unreadable spaces in which to exist happily inside. By ostensibly demonstrating a romantic relationship between Frances and Judy, but not showing any of the erotic scenes for the audience, the film presents a trans space—rather than a trans body—in the middle of the bigger city and lesbian community, which will then lead to a better and happier ending on the horizon.

Similarly, Ricky’s differences are maintained rather than flattened out for the sake of a romantic fantasy in *Boy Meets Girl*; she likes and engages with Francesca not because they are exactly alike, but precisely because they are so different. Indeed, Ricky’s bisexual identity—since she engages in romantic relationships with both men and women during the course of the film—already complicates the easy heteronormative romantic narrative along with the regressive attitudes of decades earlier which automatically assumed that trans women were trying to seize or steal cis women’s femininity (Serano *Outspoken* 185-87; see also *Whipping Girl*). Ricky is different than Francesca, like Judy is different than Frances, and that difference need not be

overcome for romance, community, or friendship. It should be maintained since these differences also open up new spaces in the city yet to be explored. While Ricky may not sing a declarative song like Judy in *Better Than Chocolate*, her reunion scene with Robby allows her to proclaim her differences and trans embodiment *and* not give them up for her love/desire.

Before being reunited with Robby at the swimming hole they visited earlier in the film, Ricky and Robby fight over their feelings about one another. During this fight, Robby implies that Ricky isn't a real girl; he states that no one is a "real" anything, and that "we're all just stumbling through life trying to figure shit out." Ricky still feels betrayed and misrepresented, so she leaves. When Robby discovers the video of young-Ricky on her computer, and its (possible) suicidal messages, he seeks her out again to reconcile, which is when Ricky challenges Robby to love her as she is; she does this by stepping out of the swimming hole naked. According to romance genre plotline rules, this can be considered a grand gesture used to overcome the conflict between the two leads (see Radway and Doherty for more on romance tropes), since it is after this embrace that Ricky and Robby lean towards their own happily ever after. Rather than seeing this scene as part of romantic tropes, however, numerous trans critics and activists saw it as transphobic; it was another way in which the movie was for cisgender audiences and not trans people (Davey and Gabe).

Their comments and criticisms are not wholly unjustified. On first glance, the scene itself is framed as one of the previously discussed reveal scenes which often eroticizes difference and fetishizes trans bodies, especially pre-operative ones (Connelly 96-99). Since Ricky emerges from the water and deliberately reveals her pre-operative body, and it is this gesture which is supposed to facilitate the apotheosis between the two love interests, it can be quite easy to read the scene as regressive and cissexist. She uses her body as a bid for acceptance, and since it is

precisely the body where gender passing is located cinematically, it seems problematic on the surface. Indeed, when I first saw this scene, I was deeply distressed and wanted to dislike the entire film. After viewing it several more times, however, I wish to suggest another way in which the scene's overall structure within the romantic comedy leaves space for a new rewriting of homecoming and embodiment. Rather than seeing Ricky's body as a template for a failed gendered passing (as previous iterations have been), I see her reveal as a reflection of the trans autobiographic story since her action demands a response from Robby and it focuses on her own sense of gender embodiment. In this scene, Ricky demands Robby to mirror her—and in exposing herself, Robby becomes a mirror which then facilitates her own embodiment. Their union together, then, allows for both cis and trans identities to exist together without cancelling one another out. The swimming hole itself also becomes a space for bodily homecoming, while the rest of the romantic plotline focuses on her quest of New York City as the narrative marriage home.

As Jay Prosser notes, one of the main ways the trans writer heals the rupture in their gendered plot is through the use of mirrors, especially viewing the body through a mirror scene (9). *Mirror Image* by Nancy Hunt is the best example in this genre since

she frames the transsexual trajectory in autobiography precisely as a progression through a series of mirror stages. Each scene schematically marks a successive moment in the author's becoming woman. From her failure to identify as a man; to her crossdressing as a woman; to her decision to transition and become a woman: the significant turning points in Hunt's transsexual transition are symbolized in highly stylized fashion with mirror scenes. (102).

The image of the mirror becomes pervasive in much of this trans literature (Prosser notes he reviewed over some fifty autobiographies from 1954-1996), but the mirror is also in other forms of identity literature, such as women's and children's fiction. This is specifically because these forms focus on the self, and the story of the self as told "backwards" like the self-realization narrative requires (Illouz 52). The "retrospective structure of autobiography" allows a literal "look back at the self" which then manifests as the trans person being "there all along" inside the mirror (Prosser 102-3). The mirror is the main way in which trans narratives become self-realized, since the mirror acts as the simultaneous container of the past experiences which can then lead to gender dysphoria *along with* the way to actualize—and for the trans person to literally see—the after image of surgery, which is part of their gendered "homecoming" (101-3). In the mirror, the body is physical and emotional; it must be embodied—physically felt—but also recognized through an emotional bond and connection. As I've stated earlier, this look backwards can become difficult to adapt to the screen since it is often deeply isolating and because the camera cannot frame it properly from page-to-screen; *Boy Meets Girl* changes this structure through the embedding of a YouTube video for Ricky's story, and therefore allowing her confessional voice to take up literal cinematic space, but her bodily homecoming is still absent.

To then have a person become a mirror—such as Robby—allows the emotionally important core of the trans memoir that the mirror represents to be represented visually. Through Robby's acceptance, the mirror scene becomes romantic/erotic yet still sensitive to trans subjectivity and embodiment. In *Boy Meets Girl*, with Robby acting as mirror, the tensions between cis/trans are interrogated and overcome through romance and recognition, thereby allowing for gender difference to remain intact and accepted without an appeal to a higher

authority figure; Ricky is accepted by herself *and* by Robby.¹⁹ Since Schaeffer also casts a trans actress in order to play a trans character, when Ricky is naked, it is not a cisgender body made to seem like a trans one; it is actually a trans body. What elevates this display to cinematic storytelling—rather than of pornography, which is where the real-life pre-operative trans body exists on screen the most—is the responses and vocal mirroring done by Robby (Connelly 97). When Ricky reveals herself, it is a demand to be seen as *trans*. After Robby calls her “the most unconfused person I know” and admits his jealousy of Francesca (thus resolving the previous miscommunication from earlier), Ricky challenges his affection for her by saying that he can “ignore it [her penis] if you want.” Robby says he does not wish to do that, and by doing so, he sees her difference not as traumatic, or as a way she is just like him (sameness, meaning maleness); rather her difference is part of her, meaning that she is a woman, but a trans woman. Moreover, she is a trans woman he finds attractive, beautiful, and wonderful. Her embodiment is maintained, but so is her core sense of self, and from there, their relationship can occur. It is also important to note that Robby admits that he was jealous of Francesca for having Ricky—not that he wishes Ricky was Francesca or anything else; cisgender womanhood is evoked, and toyed with as a fantasy space, but it is ultimately rejected.

While this scene, cinematically, may use the same body shot which has caused issues with other filmic representations, the movie’s ultimate goal and overall structure is not to punish difference, but embrace its form. Having Ricky’s body displayed is a vulnerable moment, but it is the same type of vulnerable moment Ricky displays at the beginning with her cue cards explaining the loss of her mother. It is a confession in Foucault’s sense of the term, but it is no longer one that is extracted through knowledge-power systems; instead it’s a construction of

¹⁹ The rejection of institutional support is made that much stronger and clearer when Ricky starts her own fashion line after being rejection from her dream school, and how it is the community both online and off—rather than her mother—who give her final acceptance. This is yet another reason why I see this reveal scene as progressive, rather than regressive.

love, belonging, and community. Moreover, since this scene happens at the swimming hole that has already taken on meaningful significance during the course of the film, the spatial location of their reunion also works to “synchronize the metaphorical return to the protagonist’s gendered home with an account of their arrival at the protagonist’s literal home” (Aizura “Persistence” 142).

I view the scene between Ricky and Robby as progressive in much the same way that Halberstam has doubled back on the critiques against *The Crying Game*. In his 2018 work *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Guide to Gender Variance*, Halberstam revisits some of the films he’s written about in the past, and now praises *The Crying Game* for its plot to allow “a learning curve for the main characters.” He writes that

Fergus and Dil learn what Jody had already known, namely that all forms of nationalism require fictions of the natural, the communal, and the unified, when in fact the only thing holding people together is fear and violence. In this configuration, each character finds themselves both inside and outside of national belonging, and Dil’s mismatched body becomes a symbol for the patchwork of social contradictions that nationalisms attempt to smooth over. The film also highlighted erotic tensions between the transgender woman and the cis-gender man, and while Fergus’s first reaction to Dil’s embodiment was revulsion, the film tracks an unorthodox trajectory for his desire, within which neither Dil’s gender nor Fergus’s sexual orientation is definitively fixed. (112-113).

It is precisely this connection to the body and national belonging that I see most clearly in *Boy Meets Girl*, especially through the complications of the southern small town, where I’ll turn to more closely in the next section. *Better Than Chocolate* also encourages its audience to examine

the utopic visions of the city space as a place where everyone, no matter what, is accepted. While the spectre of autogynephilia and transphobic representation haunts the edges of both romantic comedies, I do not think either Judy or Ricky are excluded from community practice, love, and belonging, and therefore, allow for their characters—as well as their audiences—the opportunity for a learning curve.

Trans Horizons

While Ricky is not excluded from womanhood in the slightest—as her conversations with Francesca and her reunion with Robby demonstrate—her relationship to spatial location is not as simple as former films with trans protagonists may have depicted. Ricky is accepted in her family (except by her mother, who is never actually given a speaking voice and so takes up no cinematic space or authority), and she is accepted by the broader world (especially as she releases her YouTube video and it goes viral), but Ricky resists this acceptance as much as she does partly because it links her too expressly with the southern landscape, and all the negative associations which may come with it. For example, when Robby insists that Ricky should ask Francesca out, Ricky declines because she does not believe she matches up with Francesca, who is “Rich. Republican. Debutant”; both Francesca’s and her fiancé David’s genders become conflated with the small town Southern ethos, especially since David is a soldier serving his country and comes home to a lavish Southern gentile backyard party halfway through the film. While Ricky and Robby both attend this backyard party, there is a distance between them and the rest of the group, even though it is not entirely warranted or maintained indefinitely. Ricky and Robby inhabit the edges of the small town, but there are numerous instances where the community reaches out to them and does so in a genial manner. Ricky’s life, in spite of not being

“Republican” is still welcomed where she is; this is important to note since it is not an act of trans- or homophobic violence that makes it so Ricky wants to leave. She feels “claustrophobic” in the small town not because she is perpetually harassed, but because her dream school and dream job are not here. In one scene, when she and Francesca fail to find a good dress for her to wear, Ricky makes one for her out of a Target tablecloth. The dress demonstrates just how much Ricky does not fit into the small town—but how she can tweak and alter what she has been given in order to survive and strive for something else.

The dress incident also illuminates the ways in which Francesca is not as “debutant” as Ricky might have suspected. She dislikes the small town as well, precisely because she cannot find a good dress or get the same fancy coffees that she can in the city. As the previous relationship between Ricky and David is also revealed through the course of the film, his ultra-masculine and heteronormative façade starts to crumble, especially as he later confesses to Francesca that he and Ricky did “all there was to do” together. Since Francesca has also done all there was to do with Ricky, everyone in the town seems to be far less straight than everyone first assumed—including Ricky. The movie’s overall goal, then, seems to be to redeem the south as a potential place of belonging through Ricky’s former love interests, much like *Better Than Chocolate* uses the lesbian relationship between Frances and Judy demonstrates the queer pockets of the big city are far more strife with conflict than someone at first might believe. Both films tackle the idea of autogynephilia and the spectre of the ‘false’ trans women of a previous era, and their solutions end up claiming and rewriting space in a very different way, one which relocates life from “the sovereign subject to the acts and collaborations that happens across bodies, buildings, and milieus” (Crawford *Transgender* 14).

As a landscape, the small town becomes representative of what Ricky craves (solid identity and embodiment), but also resists, such as problematic codes of normalization. Ricky does not fit into the typical landscape, yet she has made herself a home with her father, younger brother, and a semi-famous YouTube channel. She makes her own clothing when she cannot find something that fits, but she still recognizes that she is constrained due to her location. As she remarks on with Robby during a driving trip, she wants the same kind of “good, clean, normal, God-fearing American boy meets girl” relationship, though it seems constantly out of reach (as it is with her short-lived relationship with Francesca) and sometimes deeply problematic (as her violent confrontation with David demonstrates). It is all of these facets which lead her to proclaim “not only was I born in the wrong body, but in the wrong town” and why her dream to go to fashion school in New York City takes on significant meaning to the plot’s overall structure. Her “boy meets girl” conversation with Robby is rendered sarcastically, but the fact that the title derives its symbolic meaning from this conversation cannot be overlooked. In spite of longing to resist the gender and sexual roles which can be “claustrophobic” and “Republican” Ricky—and Robby—are both desperate to belong to something, and eventually, both characters learn that while they are welcome where they have been born, they can only accomplish what they truly want through travel.

These feelings echo what Jonathan Ames documents in his edited collection *Sexual Metamorphosis* when he states that most trans autobiographies are framed as bildungsroman where the goal for the trans person is to leave the family home for the city (xi-xii). Ames draws his assertion from his own research of trans memoirs, where most of this travel is also coupled with the surgical journey, but the most compelling argument he makes is through his own bildungsroman journey of meeting, and then reuniting with, trans woman Aleshia Brevard. In his

introduction, Ames writes of being a young man in the Midwest and meeting a beautiful blonde woman whom he was attracted to, obtained the number for, but never called. Ten years later, he moves to New York City and begins to work on his writing career, only to come across Aleshia Brevard's trans memoir. He recognizes her, and much to his delight, she later recognizes him (Ames ix-xii). Ames's story is worth reiterating in order to demonstrate how the city—especially New York City—has been coded as a queer mecca and final destination in numerous LGBTQ memoirs; Ames and Aleshia's reunion could only happen there and not in the Midwest, and much like Robby and Ricky's romance, it can only flourish away from the hometown. As Ames's anthology goes on to note, Aleshia's gender story has a similar structure to his own since she was a "Southern farm boy" (Ames x) who then migrated to big city after big city, working, drag impersonating, getting married, and achieving her gender goals. By utilizing the trek to the city trope, Ames's story, along with Aleshia's and numerous others in his collection, form their own sense of trans style which draws inspiration from the classic coming-of-age tales, previous transsexual travel memoirs, and ultimately forms something unique as travel between cities and countries becomes much easier and accessible, along with the technologies involved for transition and between communities. These story structures—as represented in the more modern memoirs post 2000 I examined in the last chapter—ultimately form something distinct and repeatable, which then gives them a sense of "transgender architectonics" (Crawford *Transgender* 2-3).

In his book *Transgender Architectonics: The Shape and Change of Modernist Space*, Lucas Crawford describes the process of "transing"—a term he borrowed from Stryker and Currah's work—which isolates the fundamental core of gender narratives stylistically and thematically, and by doing so, separates the technique of trans storytelling from the author doing

the telling. In this manner, it is then possible to overlay trans-ness (“transing”) as an interpretative tool or critical lens for text that might not be seen as transgender in any way (as he does with modernist texts from cis author Samuel Beckett [107-165])—or to take trans-ness as a lived experience and then change the way a particular space is shaped, and how those people (cis or trans) can inhabit particular spaces (1-16). Trans narratives need not be ones about the truest expression of gender identity trapped in a body, (like a neon sign shouting “VAGINA” [Plett “Before you read”]), or ones that involve travel to see a doctor; rather, trans narratives can now be seen as stories which embody themes of “constant transformation for all”; a process of “folding and refolding”; “happenings or movements” and a process which “revels in aesthetics of the surface” (14). Similarly, trans spaces are ones which fundamentally relocate the nexus of power (“sovereign subject”) to “acts of collaborations that happen across bodies, buildings, and milieus” (14); these stories need not necessarily be about individuals undergoing a self-realization narrative, but stories among and between people (like Judy and Frances), places (the bathroom, the bedroom, the swimming hole), and the acts that bring them together (such as love and romance). In this sense, trans story can be one that Comedy has been telling for centuries since it requires all of these acts between people and in specific places, and moreover, often ties everything together with a marriage home or reunion which facilitates homecoming (Booker 107-8). I see Crawford’s process of transing as the perfect way to understand the rom-com genre since its goals of confusion and reunion also mimic the exact same structure of Prosser and Ames’ trans life writing, and because rom-coms sense of space affects its characters so profoundly.

For example, Ricky’s romances reshape her hometown by using the landscape to both facilitate her own understanding of herself (“born in the wrong town”) but also her acceptance of

herself through the main couple who will stay in the south: Francesca and David. The south is often depicted as regressive and grotesque in film (Clover 125) and literature (Yaeger xi-xii) but it has now become welcoming through the growth of Ricky, David and Francesca, and of course, her relationship with Robby. Robby has been there since she was a small child—and presumably, not yet out as trans—and he continues to be there for her even as they have their own conflict. Robby is the one who hears the desire for the “boy meets girl” romance, and by the end of the narrative, he is the one who gives it to her—but unlike the reconciliation of *Different For Girls*, Robby’s plotline does not dominate Ricky’s. Instead, their cis/trans union is approached through the landscape itself—more specifically, the swimming hole where they spent their childhoods, and the car where Ricky first suggested her desire for a “boy meets girl” romance. In addition, when these trans characters—Judy or Ricky—are on screen, the space around them also becomes influenced and transformed in similar ways. The small town becomes queer thanks to Ricky, and the city has a completely new geography depending on where Judy goes, and who goes along with her. Moreover, when Judy and Maggie’s mother Lila also renovate Judy’s new house together, they both seem to work through the difficult notions of a prototypical homecoming—that of “fixity” (Halberstam *Trans** 150); it is important to note that when Lila finds out about Judy’s trans status, it is the exact moment when they both become fed up with the standard paint schema they have been using for the renovation and throw it against the wall instead. The paint is lavender, but unlike Adam in *Priscilla*, they are not using the lavender colour to mask hateful speech; rather they use the lavender to remove and completely renovate how they view themselves within a larger space, which then influences how they view themselves (Judy as a trans woman without a family or origin and Lila as a divorced woman in middle age) in a larger world. Their paint-throwing is not an act of cover-up, but another act of transformation.

Both Robby and Ricky become transformed and self-realized in *Boy Meets Girl*, but their relationship is also not the end of Ricky's story. Even as she and Robby finally have their romantic union, *Boy Meets Girl* cannot end with her dreams on hold or without the final trek to the city untaken. Therefore, a week after their union, Ricky receives letters from numerous people who send her one dollar bills in thank you cards in order for her to start her own fashion line in New York City. This act happens through Robby's suggestion that Francesca send the dress Ricky made for her to a famous YouTuber (real-life YouTube star DailyGrace) who then promotes it on her channel and starts the donations. Now that Ricky can attend her school, and has the means to do it, the film ends with both Ricky and Robby driving off together for their happily ever after. Even if Ricky's self-realization narrative is now about fashion design and not her gender, its core cinematic structure still becomes trans through its use of travel and its invocation of the city/country binaries, much like Ames's own story about Aleshia. The small southern town holds her back through her career choice (her dream school is not here) rather than transphobia or a lack of acceptance, since she has been and always read as and accepted as a woman during the entire course of the film. Rather than relying on the prototypical antagonistic attack of her trans identity in order to make her identity stronger, *Boy Meets Girl* shifts the inherent conflict in the story to that of her dream job and her need for romance, both which work to give her a sense of future. In effect, the modern trans story understood as architecture—especially ones facilitated by YouTube—changes the literal shape and space of the story, and this new architecture of trans storytelling is then presented visually on the screen in completely new ways. In *Boy Meets Girl*, the trip to the city—regardless of the reason for it—takes on a “trans” shape, while the hometown's common associations with fixity and regression also become reshaped in this new environment.

Ricky's trans embodiment is embedded in other scenes through non-invasive ways. For instance, there are pill bottles on Ricky's shelves which contain her daily hormones (figure 12). It is important to note that these hormones are never once spoken about in the film; they are in the background, present, but only recognizable to those who have had interactions with these types of pill bottles. It is a symbol that only has meaning to some people, which adds another layer to the film's production and critical reception. Rather than an active stance of reinterpreting certain cinematic codes to mean something more solidly trans/trans* in some way (such as the retrospectatorship that Patricia White uses and that I've argued for in the bulk of this dissertation), *Boy Meets Girl* embeds cinematic codes solely for trans people (and those who share intimate space with trans people) to recognize. This is critically important. Not only is there now something visually recognizable as part of trans daily life, but *it is not explained in the film*. The pills are just there; they are only present, tangible, and meaningful for a trans gaze watching the film at home. Though the film itself is not outright anchored around the idea of Ricky's gender transition, it is also not invisible in the least. It is viscerally present if the viewer knows where to look. By integrating trans identity into her life, the film not only removes the intense medical gaze under which most mainstream trans representation has been filmed, but it adds a new type of embodied representation to previous iterations of trans identity as a whole. Ricky is a trans woman and her life differs from that of cisgender women—as her numerous interactions with Francesca point out—but she is still a woman and definitely not a man—as her romance with Robby points out. Even without these two people bookending her life and gender, however, she would still be trans because the quotidian reminders of trans life exist in this world, and the screen in which her story is told.



Figure 12: Ricky's hormones in *Boy Meets Girl*. This is one of several scenes.

Credit: screenshot taken by author (Distributor: Wolfe Video).

Critic Nirta Caterina has noted that in order to imagine the future for trans people, society must first deal with “the materialism of everyday life” and embodiment; it is in those moments of present-tense where “a heteronormative discourse that mystifies and victimizes” trans people can be “radical restructur[ed] and reconsider[ed] [through] disciplinary politics that govern subjectivity.” In effect, the quotidian battles need to be overcome before anything too theoretical can be accomplished. Indeed, this present-tense embodiment is one of the main reasons why critics have protested cisgender actors playing trans characters in cinema. The first argument against this practice is, as I explored in the previous chapter, one which implies that to be trans is temporary; it robs trans people of seeing themselves in the present-tense and therefore robs them of a future. But there is another layer to this argument, one which states that to cast cis people in trans roles is to rob them of the acting opportunity and jobs that come with that role. It is an economic argument, one embedded in the everyday lived realities and material conditions. A cis person playing a trans person literally takes the job and materials used to survive away from someone trans, who as Caterina notes in the article, already have a difficult time economically. Before any kind of battles in the larger socio-political realm can be accomplished, the basic

living conditions must be fulfilled. Ricky does not merely save for her surgery or medical care in *Boy Meets Girl*, then; she is saving for her daily embodiment, her daily life, which is the foundation for everything else. While her goals of New York City keep her focused on the future as a possible queerer horizon that “is not yet here” (Muñoz 1) which in turns gives her a sense of futurity lacking in numerous other depictions, the mere presence of her hormones on her bureau also implies that she has “the materialism of everyday life” and it is just as—if not more—important (Caterina). These daily needs are in no way lesser than the queerer future or more standardized romantic goals, only that these daily ones must come first. This sentiment is similarly echoed in a conversation she has upon meeting Francesca at the coffee house where she works, as it solidifies Caterina’s main argument in basic terms: when Francesca asks for a “double-latte caramel frappuccino, please” Ricky tells her that “Starbucks is on Montague Street; we sell coffee here.” Not only is this a statement of limitations, but it’s a statement about geography. Before getting the frappuccino, you first must see what’s in front of you: coffee. In addition to that coffee, though, there is also Ricky *and* Robby *and* the entire aesthetic of the current location. You can move beyond this location, but to do so means first seeing where you are, who is with you, and the surface features; in effect “the materialism of everyday life” (Caterina).

The romance genre focuses on the black coffee and the possible frappuccino; the daily misunderstandings and the ultimate happy ending; the queerness of everyday life, but also the queerness of the horizon. All of these facets work together in order to present Ricky with a present-tense focus on the world as it is and as she inhabits in its materially and physically, but the romance genre also allows Ricky to view her future in a better, and possibly, more queerer light even if it is not yet here (Muñoz 1). As Caterina has posited, building on José Esteban

Muñoz's notion of queer utopia, the "[m]undane instances of everyday life, such as inhabiting a space, making contact with other individuals, using a public toilet, are occasions on which to imprint one's [own] narrative." For trans characters like Ricky (and trans people like Michelle Hendley playing her), as well as Judy who already inhabits the big city but from a very distinct vantage point, that daily narrative "is as utopian as it is material: it is generated and kept alive by the specificity of a subjectivity that is already part of a whole and that is as minute and volatile as it is permanent and real." The romance genre with its focus on the daily pragmatics as well as the larger celebrations of life then acts as the perfect vehicle in order to adapt a new form of trans representation where embodiment is not forgotten, but also not the only concern among characters. Both *Better Than Chocolate* and *Boy Meets Girl* reflects these tiny misunderstandings as well as the larger "general chaos" (Booker 107) of life so represented in Comedy, but these films do so with the utmost respect for their trans characters, and ultimately, towards an ending where "a whole community emerg[es] from the shadows, join[s] together in joyful celebration round the loving union of a hero and heroine" (Booker 109) and the "universal relief" (Booker 108) for all.

Conclusion

The final scenes of *Better Than Chocolate* contain an epilogue where each couple is presented with the additional ending to their happily ever after on-screen. For Judy and Frances, they both get married and have their wedding colours declared as lime and taupe. In *Boy Meets Girl*, Ricky and Robby leave their hometown in the same car that once contained all Ricky's hopeful dreams for the "boy meets girl" romance she longed for and drive off into the horizon, heading towards New York City. Like most rom-coms of a modern era, *Boy Meets Girl* and

Better Than Chocolate intermix the romance and self-realization plotlines (Illouz 74-78). The happily ever after required of the romance genre occurs when the couple is reunited in the marriage home, but *also* when the lead protagonist discovers something about herself. Each film also takes these plotlines one step farther by emphasizing the community's role in both of these endings, which truly turns each one into a comedy film for a newer, inclusive era. Linking the classic Comedy plotline to the "archetypal" (Prosser 101) trans narrative allows for a new architecture of trans stories to be told, for queerer geographies of the city to emerge, along with new interpretations of love and romance between communities and individuals who have not always seen eye-to-eye. These multiple romance plotlines all allow for the numerous binaries of trans representation—cis/trans, real/fake, man/woman and even city/country—to be deconstructed in favour of a community stance, one which grows exponentially through the use of new media and new community understanding of themselves and others. Each film offers a look at the queerer horizon without forgetting the daily pragmatics of life, which seems to be the happiest ending overall.

Conclusion

Vehicle for Change

One of the last chapters of Joelle Ruby Ryan's work on trans representation in film is about the often contentious genre of documentary. It is no surprise that she opens this chapter with the film *Let Me Die A Woman*, since it encapsulates much of the

history of transgender subjectivity being subsumed under the auspices of the legal, medical, surgical, psychological and psychiatric establishment in the U.S. [and so] this representation [in *Let Me Die a Woman*] is simply a more blatant and in-your-face imaging of how transgender bodies have historically been displayed, colonized, controlled and objectified. (240).

I have only glimpsed some of this representational history in my dissertation, but I have found much the same—with perhaps some variations—on this theme, especially in mainstream films. I have used adaptation theory in order to document how these images, motifs, and characters on the screen could have possibly emerged, but of course, my own documentation is coming from a very specific perspective. I have not, and cannot, claim to understand the whys or interiority of anyone's decision. I can only trace back what I saw on the screen and interpret from there.

In the first chapter of my dissertation, I examined the oscillating ideas of truth in the “based on a true story” film through the re-workings and complications that Thomas Leitch and S.S. Park discuss in their work in adaptation studies, and I did this while also leaving enough room for trans people’s early memoirs to be taken seriously as a source text, even if it does not quite make it to the cinema screen due to the limitations of time-art and space-art (according to Bluestone’s concepts [60-61]) and overall cisgender bias. In the second chapter, I complicated

the trope of the trans criminal/monster by using Patricia White's concept of retrospectatorship, which allows a potential viewer's subconscious fantasy to influence and re-inscribe new meaning to what they see on the screen, and by doing so, I aimed to possibly reclaim two main trans characters who have been misread and maligned over the years by cis audiences/producers but who also hold strong potential for certain transsexual/transgender re-readings: Brandon Teena and Buffalo Bill. In chapter three, I examined the confusing and often contradictory gender representation of the 1990s, and drawing on White's concept once again, I re-inscribed possible new meaning for gender nonconforming characters in the road film, especially as the political, social, and gender dynamics of the 1990s shifted into the 2000s; these films, while they can be read (and have been read) as a wholly inaccurate portrayals of these real-life struggles, I assert that can also be viewed as acts of freeplay adaptation where numerous ideas during the production and reception combine with subjective memory, and as such, each film presents an amalgamation of the cultural milieu without necessarily taking an affirmative—or necessarily accurate—stance. Lastly, I used Lucas Crawford's notion of trans architecture to demonstrate how the romantic-comedy genre can become a good structural home for trans stories, especially when adapted to the screen as a love story between a cis/trans partnership, and/or a self-realization that takes trans people into the city, and as such, transforms the geography to suit their own needs, desires, and overall archetypal tale.

There is still more work to do, especially within representation. Film is a multipurpose medium and its screen can contain so many projections, interpretations, and potential. It can also include and circulate hurtful, damaging, and otherwise outright wrong images. Yet in Ryan's assessment of the transgender documentary, her critique shifts as she analyzes the trans-made or trans-influenced films like *Toilet Training*, *Fenced Out*, *Cruel and Unusual*, and *Screaming*

Queen (240-289). Trans representation's former history of objectification is ameliorated in these more activist focused works according to Ryan (240). In these films, trans people have taken the camera back themselves and used it to document their lives and political struggles and triumphs. Even if Ryan asserts that the "history of transgender documentary parallels the history of transgender objectification" and more broadly speaking, the history of trans representation in Hollywood and mainstream films is also filled with these similar objectified and controlled images, Ryan herself also highlights the "hopeful" angle of documentary as its filmic lens "also inherits the history of transgender emergence and liberation" (240).

It is this final stance—that there can be hope in specific modes of representation—that I would like to end this dissertation with, since it is this hopeful stance which I have seen in the documentaries she discusses, along with the newer films made by trans writers, producers, and directors along with some of their cis counterparts. I have seen this hope from my limited perspective as a cis viewer, watching these films with trans, non-binary, and cis friends. I also see this hopeful turn in a film like 2015's *Tangerine*.

Tangerine is about two trans sex workers named Sin-Dee and Alexandra as they seek out Sin-Dee's boyfriend/pimp who they have learned is cheating on her with a cisgender woman. As the two women zigzag across the Hollywood strip over Christmas Eve and into Christmas Day, they run into former and current clients, exes, friends, and strangers. The film documents only a single day; it is a slice-of-life rather than a single sweeping narrative about that life. In representing the world of these two protagonists in this simple manner, the film tells a complex story of trans life, love, and survival; it is exactly "the materialism of everyday life" that critic Nirta Caterina writes about. The film also offers a new type of mobility and geography, since its one-night quest-like adventure mostly takes place on foot through a large city (Hollywood) and

as such, offers a new kind of trans architecture that shifts “the sovereign subject to the acts and collaborations that happens across bodies, buildings, and milieus” (Crawford *Transgender* 14). The director Sean Baker, and his cowriter Chris Bergoch, are two white cisgender men; they do not share the same “materialism of everyday life” (Caterina) with the characters they represent, nor the actors who represent these characters. Yet this film, among the numerous others that have come out since Ryan wrote her own work on trans representation, seems to encapsulate that hopeful feeling inside of her critiques.

I am not alone in thinking this; *Tangerine* was praised by numerous critics for its portrayal of the women's story, for its simple ability to allow the trans women “to live” their lives on the screen (Cooper). The writer and director, in this case, got something right. Rather than focusing on the image they represented on the screen itself, however, I think the film’s success has far more about the lenses in which the director used: *Tangerine* was shot on three iPhones (Cooper; Smith).

This may seem like a trivial detail, something that says more about Hollywood and film funding than anything related to the nuance of trans representation, but I think the iPhone is paramount to understanding why this film works well within Ryan’s mode of hopeful representation, and especially why I see *Tangerine* as a road film of a new era. The iPhone is a mobile phone; it allows the user to take it with them wherever they go, and it allows for the director to follow these characters wherever they walk in downtown Hollywood. And there is a lot of walking in *Tangerine*. These are trans women whose mobility—both social and literal—is limited. When the film starts, Sin-Dee is just getting out of jail; in order to find her boyfriend, the women must find and get to him on their own; most of their sex work goes on in cars that are not their own. If I return to the analogy that the car, especially in the road narrative, can be the

vehicle for change and transformation as much as it can be the thing that stops the narrative outright, then *Tangerine* offers yet another solution in the contentious history of trans road narratives: walk. Forget the car. Your feet can get you there.

The act of walking, then, is an act of resistance in the film. It allows these trans subjects to be mobile on their own terms. And the iPhone is paramount in making this happen, capturing it, and displaying it for the audience to see, know, and come to understand in some way. It is not that Sean Baker or Chris Bergoch have any unique insight necessarily; I think it comes down to the very materials they have used, since it uses that exact documentary lens which Ryan has critiqued so deftly in her work on representation. If Marshall McLuhan is right, and the medium is the message (7), then the iPhone, like the YouTube video, and the stop-motion animation that Clyde Peterson uses in *Torrey Pines*, allows for the message to now focus on trans lives as they have lived them. The iPhone allows the audience to witness the whole history of trans objectification and emergence in one film, scene by scene, step by step. It might be fairer to call Baker a documenter, rather than director, because this work captures so much of Ryan's critique and her praise. *Tangerine*'s storyline is fictional, but it feels real, like Clyde Peterson's stop-motion and silent animation feels real.

I started this dissertation with *Torrey Pines* because, for me, it expressed one of the most common narrative tropes of trans life—that of the road—and it made it accessible and understandable to anyone who watched it while also putting it within a distinctly American context and mythos. I close with *Tangerine* because it represents one of the most common experiences for trans cinema itself—exploitation, misrepresentation—and attempts to amend that by changing the medium itself, and yet again, does this in a very American do-it-yourself kind of way. The road narrative is quintessentially American, but so is the trans story.

Both *Tangerine* and *Torrey Pines* also represent the sentiment of the postcard (Wish You Were Here) the most, because both express inherent longing and nostalgia (without tipping into the imperialist vein that some texts have done). Both films also challenge the Wish You Were Here cry by firmly planting their main characters' feet on the ground and displaying that they were here already. Sin-Dee and Alexandra walk and walk and walk through Hollywood, while Peterson reaches back into his own past road trip and reconstructs it as nearly silent animation. Peterson's 'here' when he was twelve may look very different than his 'here' now in 2016 when he released the film and the 2019 when I am writing about it, and but his trip is still his own, like the two women from *Tangerine*'s 2015 trip is still completely relevant in 2019, but also still uniquely their own. Each iteration of the road and mobility is wildly different, but both are still a firm step towards a better future.

As wonderful as these films are, however, I must also confront the lack of representation that is still on-going. Like Jeffrey Tambor says, and Jack Halberstam echoes in *Trans** (115-119), there is and seems like there will always will be more work to do in trans representation, both on-screen and off, in the audience and in the film reviews, in the production and critical reception. As Stuart Murray reminds me, I must look twice at my own work, along with every other image I see that claims to represent someone real. As a concluding line, then, I'd like to acknowledge that *Tangerine* and *Torrey Pines* also remind me of the ending to Stryker's essay "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix." Her words seem like a fitting ending for this dissertation, especially as she begins her last paragraph talking about walking a path. Stryker writes,

If this is your path, as it is mine, let me offer whatever solace you may find in this monstrous benediction: May you discover the enlivening

power of darkness within yourself. May it nourish your rage. May your rage inform your actions, and your actions transform you as you struggle to transform your world. (255).

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