

TRANSITIONING PUBLICS

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN CINEMA AND MEDIA STUDIES
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO

July 2016

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ABSTRACT

TRANSITIONING PUBLICS engages two forms of ‘transitioning’ simultaneously: the shifting political landscape of transgender media representation in North America, and the technological shifts that impact forms of representation and information dissemination such as movements from film to video and the Internet. Through critical engagement with moving-image work made by and about transgender people outside of – and often in spite of – the mainstream, each section of the project considers various aesthetic, formal, and political impulses that contribute to the construction of ‘transgender’ as both identity category and socio-political event.

While transgender studies was originally articulated as a movement to locate and legitimize transgender subject matter, identities, authors, and politics in the academic mainstream, TRANSITIONING PUBLICS aligns with the call made by Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore to move beyond discussions of “trans-” centered exclusively on gender (2008). To that end, the written components of the project are accompanied by a short film, *Between You and Me*. Employing home video scholarship alongside canonical sexuality studies theory, *Between You and Me* expands upon the aforementioned theoretical charge in trans studies by critically and creatively interrogating the intersectional relationship between moral panics, desire, and identity through alternative digital modes; namely a 10 minute film with 2 additional video components, scheduled for online release with CBC Short Docs in July 2016.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I often say that York University is the only place wherein I could have successfully executed this hybrid, experimental, interdisciplinary work. Brenda Longfellow has been a rigorous, methodical and instrumental champion and challenger to my thinking. John Greyson is an ever-inspiring example of someone capable of doing all things simultaneously, while remaining generous and encouraging. Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue offered early, formative opportunities for my work to live in public, and continue to teach me about accountability, community, and art making as a process of public questioning. The production of *Between You and Me* was made infinitely more manageable on account of Sharon Hayashi and Michael Salman's support and generosity. Kuowei Lee helped my life as a doctoral student feel organized, supported and possible, and Janine Marchessault provided inspirational fuel and feedback for a life beyond the Ph.D. As a Master's student in Gender, Feminist and Women's Studies, Mike Zryd took an early chance on my studies by inviting me into his CMS methods class, further solidifying that I was in the right place at the right time. I feel grateful for the continued friendship and cohort camaraderie of Cameron Moneo, Genne Speers, Terra Long and Eli Horwatt.

A year and a half of my doctoral studies were spent as a Mellon Fellow in Arts Practice and Scholarship at the Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry at the University of Chicago. There, I created formative professional and personal relationships with many. Lauren Berlant and Kristen Schilt continue to open up possibilities for future work and friendship that are expansive. Hillary Chute, Tianna Paschel, Forrest Stuart and Patrick Jagoda offered excellent company in the seemingly impossible project of balancing work and play. I am grateful to Linda Zerilli, Gina Olson and Tate Brazas at the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality; and David Levin,

Leslie Buxbaum Danzig, and Mike Schuh at the Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry for supporting new work and modes of collaborative inquiry.

The substance of my dissertation would not be possible without the continued motivation and cultural work of those within it. I remain ever inspired by Chris Vargas, Sam Feder, Kate Bornstein, Jen Richards and the many other makers who I have yet to meet. I am indebted to the Skoor family – in particular, to Michael and Rebekah – for the trust and emotional expansiveness required for the making of *Between You and Me*. Hannah Dyer, Casey Mecija, Kaleb Robertson, Zoe Whittall, Gabby Moser, and Tama de Szegheo-Lang remind me that life is good outside the walls of a dissertation; and Naomi de Szegheo-Lang makes home feel joyously calm, alphabetized and easy. Finally, my family has remained steadfast in their support of so many iterations of this life and related project creation. I am very lucky.

Funding provided by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council, the Ontario Graduate Scholarship, and the Provost Dissertation Scholarship at York University significantly aided in the completion of this work.

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INTRODUCTION

Transitioning Publics, Trans(itioning) Subjects

In May 2014, transgender artist and activist Laverne Cox was featured on the cover of TIME magazine underneath the headline “The Transgender Tipping Point” (Steinmetz 2014). That same year, organizers of the Transgender Day of Remembrance announced that no fewer than 226 transgender people had been murdered or went missing in 2014. Reporting in August 2015, *The New York Times* confirmed that increased visibility has not resulted in decreased rates of violence experienced by transgender people (Rogers 2015). Pervasive economic and social discrimination, lack of access to educational and occupational resources, and isolation from peers and family continue to impact and devastate the most marginal members of the transgender community. As a transgender moving-image artist and scholar, I strive to bring such conflicts into public discussion by utilizing strategies of interdisciplinary engagement to interrogate visual representations of gender and violence. My work is situated in the context of a highly pivotal cultural moment wherein transgender issues are being foregrounded in mainstream media, the academy, and the arts; yet violence against the transgender community remains rampant.



TRANSITIONING PUBLICS engages two forms of ‘transitioning’ simultaneously: the shifting political landscape of transgender media representation in North America, and the technological shifts that impact forms of representation and information dissemination such as movements from film to video and the Internet. Through critical engagement with moving-image

work made by and about transgender people outside of – and often in spite of – the mainstream, each section considers various aesthetic, formal, and political impulses that contribute to the construction of ‘transgender’ as both identity category and socio-political event. While transgender studies was originally articulated as a movement to locate and legitimize transgender subject matter, identities, authors, and politics in the academic mainstream, I see my work aligning with the call made by Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore to move beyond discussions of “trans-” centered exclusively on gender (2008). In the Introduction to *WSQ*’s issue on “trans-” (2008), the editors write, “In seeking to promote cutting-edge feminist work that builds on existing transgender-oriented scholarship to articulate new generational and analytical perspectives, we didn’t want to perpetuate a minoritizing or ghettoizing use of ‘transgender’ to delimit and contain the relationship of ‘trans-’ conceptual operations to ‘-gender’ statuses and practices” (11). They continue, “we have assembled work we consider to be ‘doubly trans’ in some important sense—work that situates ‘trans-’ in relation to transgender yet moves beyond the narrow politics of gender identity” (15).

To that end, the written components of my dissertation are accompanied by a short film, *Between You and Me*. Employing the home video scholarship of Patricia Zimmerman (1995) and Marsha and Devin Orgeron (2007), alongside the canonical sexuality studies theory of Gayle Rubin (1984), *Between You and Me* expands upon the aforementioned theoretical charge in trans studies by critically and creatively interrogating the intersectional relationship between moral panics, desire, and identity. Building upon research-creation as methodology as theorized by Chapman and Sawchuk (2012) and Manning and Massumi (2014), the film is anchored by a conversation about Michael Skoor, a family friend convicted of 20+ counts of child sexual abuse and sentenced to 29 years in a California state prison. As someone who experienced sexual

violence in my own childhood, my connection with Michael has been historically fraught with conflicted messaging. Was it possible to move through the polarized circumstances of violence that surrounded us both? And how was I to make sense of the public condemnation of him and his offenses alongside the private mourning of his friends and family? I turned to documentary film production and queer theory as a way to address these questions, and to critical studies of sexuality and transgender studies to make sense of these intersecting realities and debates.

The study of film and new media is widely understood to assist in our ability to understand social and political climates (Egan 1994; Renov 2004; Halberstam 2005). Similarly, queer theory provides structural and theoretical avenues through which to question commonly taken-for-granted ideals (Butler 1990). By positioning these two theoretical approaches within the realm of transgender cultural production and theory, my work seeks to explore how hybrid research-creation projects developed within the academy, grounded in both text and moving-image, can enable new pathways for creative and critical inquiry about violence and transgender people. Drawing on traditional documentary theory, home movie and video scholarship, practices of feminist and queer representation, new media technologies, and emerging experimental genres such as conversation-based writing, the two components of my dissertation work in tandem as a critical platform for traditional scholarship, experimental formats, and moving-image creation.

My use of ‘trans(itioning) subjects’ throughout this project, as both a categorical label and a gestural framework, signals the inherent instability of theorizing people and processes that are perpetually in motion. ‘Trans(itioning) subjects’ therefore becomes an operative for various intersecting and related foci in my work: it might refer to a human who is transitioning away from the gender with which they were assigned at birth, it might refer to a human who has previously transitioned but remains marked in some capacity by said processes and/or

identifications, or it might refer to subjects moving from positions of gendered visibility into places of unknown identificatory obscurity.

I am particularly interested in visual treatments of trans(itioning) subjects that showcase various attempts to flesh out, and en flesh, the self simultaneously. If we assume fleshing out to be a process of clarification, and enfleshing to be a process of giving body and form,¹ the concurrency of these actions reifies a series of representative conflicts and tensions. Locating trans(itioning) subjects in various visual publics renders these tensions visible for intervention and analysis. By focusing on the aesthetic strategies of these encounters, I wonder how we might defamiliarize² trans(itioning) as a knowable object of study, and therefore open up new potentialities for lived and critical inquiry. In summary, my use of trans(itioning) subjects as an operative throughout this project signals four processes simultaneously: 1) ‘subjects’ as both subjectivities and subject matter 2) ‘trans’ as umbrella term for gender identities that exist beyond and in spite of that which was assigned at birth 3) ‘transitioning’ as processes of movement from one identificatory location to another, often without teleology and 4) ‘transitioning’ as shifts in, and access to, various technologies. Transitioning in this context takes on surgical, performative, poetic, hormonal, social and political meanings.³ This project is not a historical survey, but rather, a series of case studies that showcase artists who are critically and

¹ See Vivian Sobchack’s *Carnal Thoughts* (2004) for further articulation of bodies not just as objects, but also as sense-making subjects in cinema. Sobchack’s book marks a move away from psychoanalysis toward understanding corporeality and the experience of being a body in a world with others as central. This intervention is critical when

² Here, I am invoking the work of Michael Warner when he says, “The apparent clarity of common sense is corrupt with ideology and can only be countered by defamiliarization in thought and language. The task of the intellectual is to disclose all the forms of distortion, error, and domination that have been embedded in the current version of common sense.” (2002, 132)

³ I am aware that “trans*” is also used to represent a fluidity of linguistic expression to encapsulate transgender, transsexual, gender fluid and other gender non-conforming identities. In the context of this project, I believe that trans(itioning) subjects is a more precise articulation of these necessary fluidities, as my work extends beyond identities to broader technological and representative practices.

aesthetically engaging with alternative and often overlooked representative histories, outside modes of mainstream production.

CULTURAL CLIMATE and REPRESENTATIONAL HISTORIES

Published in 2008, Susan Stryker's *Transgender History* offers a succinct synthesis of activist, artistic, and social histories of gender non-conforming communities in the USA. Since then, a proliferation of alternative and additive histories has emerged to supplement Stryker's well-regarded record. While not the first person to medically transition, the media attention surrounding Christine Jorgensen's life choices in 1952 offered one of the first public access points to issues related to transsexuality and transition. The Compton Cafeteria and Stonewall Riots, led by trans women of color in 1966 and 1969, respectively, are commonly regarded as critical launching pads for LGBT political activism and remain touchstones of critical debate. In the 1970s and 80s, activist and mainstream attention was afforded to specific formative cases in transgender history, such as Renée Richards, who won the right to play professional tennis as a woman in 1977, and AIDS activist and trans man Lou Sullivan, who formed the San Francisco chapter of FTM International in 1986.⁴

The 1993 murder of Brandon Teena in rural Nebraska inspired heightened and focused media attention on trans issues. Murder rates of transsexual, transgender and gender non-conforming people continued to rise dramatically; as a result, the Transgender Day of Remembrance⁵ is observed on November 20th of each year. In 2002, legal advocacy group The Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP) was formed in New York City and named after Sylvia Rivera, a trans advocate and organizer of the 1969 Stonewall uprising. Dean Spade – SRLP co-founder – became one of the most out-spoken and cited advocates for systemic change in medical and

⁴ FTM International was one of the first advocacy groups for transgender men in North America and still organizes today. Link to view: <http://www.ftmi.org/>

⁵ <https://tdor.info/>

prison industrial complexes on behalf of gender non-conforming people.

While scholars such as Dean Spade and Susan Stryker remain at the epicenter of trans studies in North America, many activist histories have been lost to processes of racialized and classed historical revision; artists are often responsible for necessary and timely excavations. With the exception of Jack Halberstam's *In A Queer Time and Place* (2005), there is no published analysis of trans(itioning) subjects in moving-image media that investigates their interrelationship to broader technological processes and related access to numerous publics. That said, various documentary projects generated by/for/about trans(itioning) subjects exist in the cultural landscape, and criticism and theory about transitioning are available widely in the social sciences and, at times, in the humanities (Nakamura 1998; Schilt 2010; Beemyn and Rankin 2011).

Published in 2006, John Phillips' *Transgender on Screen* introduces itself as the "first detailed study of screen representations of transgender" (1) and offers a synthesis of mainstream moving-image representations of gender non-conforming people in three categories: comedies, thrillers and mixed-genre. Phillips relies heavily on Marjorie Garber's *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, while also acknowledging the proliferation of media and related attention to gender non-confirming subject matters since her 1992 publication.

Historically, representations of trans(itioning) people have been relegated to three dominant categories within mainstream North American cinema: imposter, easy-going humorous relief, or monster/killer. Films such as *Just One of the Guys* (1985) and *The Crying Game* (1992) characterize the gender non-conforming person as a liar or imposter.⁶ As a result, the trans(itioning) subject is responsible for inspiring doubt and speculation in viewing publics. In

⁶ For further elaboration, see Talia Mae Bettcher's article, "Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion," in Vol 22, Issue 3 of *Hypatia*, August 2007.

contrast, gender non-conforming characters have also been presented as overly palatable and easy going. Films such as *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (1995) and the television show *Holiday Heart* (2000) drop trans(itioning) subjects into predictably gendered worlds to fix problems and right the wrongs of other people. Finally, representations of trans(itioning) subjects as monsters and killers overwhelm. Films such as *Psycho* (1960) and *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) reverse the reality of trans people as murdered subjects and instead render them fear-provoking agents. As such, gender-variance becomes a site of fear, hesitation and distrust in dominant mainstream cinema.

In the contemporary moment, mainstreaming of transgender identities and issues is considered to be at its historical peak. A proliferation of guest appearances on primetime networks emerged in the late 2000s to much media acclaim, such as actress Candis Cayne's recurring role on *Dirty, Sexy, Money* in 2007, and Cher Bono's son, Chaz, making his transition public in the documentary *Becoming Chaz* (2011). Trans characters and storylines are featured on television shows such as *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix), *Transparent* (Amazon Prime) and *Sense8* (Netflix), mainstream news engines such as *The New York Times* and *Time Magazine* report on issues facing transgender communities with frequency, and yet many important issues, people and politics remain missing from these public debates.

At present, conversations about the politics of casting cisgender (non-trans) people in trans roles dominate the industrial mainstream. Tom Hopper's *The Danish Girl* (2015) and Jean-Marc Vallée's *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013) star Eddie Redmayne and Jared Leto, respectively, in roles that many contend should have been played by trans women.⁷ This year at the Toronto

⁷ See Daniel Reynolds writing for *The Advocate*: <http://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/2015/02/25/transface-problem-hollywood>

International Film Festival, Elle Fanning played a young trans-masculine person in *About Ray* (2015).

Dialogue about casting, access and representation extends far beyond the feature film screen. Amazon's *Transparent*, written and directed by Jill Soloway, stars cisgender actor Jeffrey Tambor as its lead, and has been subject to online community debate.⁸ Many argue that Soloway's thoughtful casting, supported by a cast and crew of many trans people, is a suitable alternative.⁹ Others contend that the conversation should shift to be one about access: what would happen if trans actors had access to the same resources and related training as cis people?

Tangerine (2015), a drama-comedy shot entirely on iPhones, premiered at Sundance in 2015, marking a turning point in festivals for both DIY technologies and trans representational histories. In a recent discussion at SoHo House in Toronto, trans identified star Mya Taylor recounted the story of being cast by director Sean Baker while sitting on a bench outside of the LGBT resource center in Los Angeles, a place where she had been seeking services. In conversation after a screening at the Lincoln Center in New York City,¹⁰ Baker and Taylor discussed their collaboration and its relationship to the pursuit of authenticity: "From the beginning," declared Taylor to the audience, "I told Sean, if I am going to help you with this project, and you are going to do it about this area, then I need for this to be as real as possible, I need for this to be raw." With such a new, collaborative, publicized agenda, *Tangerine* sits in the spotlight of contemporary debates about trans representational practice in the mainstream. The technologies employed by Baker in the making of the project reveal a blurring of lines between amateur and professional, industrial and indie. Lives lived by trans(itioning) subjects within the

⁸ See Nora O'Donnell writing for *Indiewire*: <http://www.indiewire.com/2014/10/how-authentic-is-transparent-a-transgender-activist-on-jeffrey-tambor-and-other-portrayals-69529/>

⁹ See Leela Ginelle writing for *Bitch Media*: <https://bitchmedia.org/post/transparent-producers-say-they-welcome-the-debate-on-casting-jeffrey-tambor-as-a-transgender->

¹⁰ Film Society of Lincoln Center talk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RR1rJUdNf34>

world of *Tangerine* more accurately echo worlds lived outside *Tangerine*, thus countering stereotypes of mainstream representation through rigorous recognition of – to return to Taylor’s words – the raw and the real. From a methodological perspective, such a goal was achieved through a collaborative enterprise between a non-trans director and a trans lead.

PROJECT METHODS

As trans(itioning) becomes a less sensationalized and more mediated process of personal and political becoming, this project proposes broad implications for technological methods of representation in public. To this end, each section of this dissertation identifies a curated collection of moving-image material – feature length documentary, short film, TV/streaming series and the Internet – authored by experimental and independent makers who are contesting the dominant discourse of trans(itioning) subjects in the mainstream. By addressing trans(itioning) subjects in this manner, I seek to a) illuminate ubiquitous assumptions made about trans autobiographical narratives, b) remove the easily individualized – and often sentimentalized – characteristics of any given subject, and c) provide a more nuanced and critical in point to trans(itioning) as an aesthetic, and at times, (de)politicized process of public engagement.

Inspired by the cross-disciplinary, conversational theory making of Lisa Duggan and José Muñoz (2009), James Baldwin and Audre Lorde (1984), and Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman (2013), I approach this project as both a methodological experiment and as an articulation of collaborative, interdisciplinary methodological inquiry. From my institutional location within film studies, trans studies, and queer theory, I take up Berlant and Edelman’s assertion that all relationality “puts into play reaction, accommodation, transference, exchange, and the articulation of narratives” (viii) on account of our proximity to, and engagement with, various

forms of intimacy. As such, this project takes up conversation in strategic capacities to build upon legacies of thinkers collaboratively discussing social issues.

Writing in 2010, Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash issue a call to pair the theorization of queer methods with research practice. My work sits in conversation with such scholars and related charges that endeavour to practice what they preach, offering innovative theoretical and oftentimes alternative methods to move beyond traditional modes of academic writing and research inquiry (Cvetkovich 2012; Stewart 2007). As a cluster of methodological potentials, practice-based research (PBR), performative research, and practice-driven theory are methods that allow for the research processes, questions, and outcomes to form and reveal themselves over time. This ongoing process of revelation is particularly relevant to my thinking as it relates to documentary film production, as only through processes of assembly and editing do some theoretical groundings manifest.¹¹

Rather than starting from formalized research questions, this dissertation project began from a series of observations, aesthetic impulses, and political sparks. Irit Rogoff (2006) illuminates that practice-driven theory often emerges from the personal,¹² and unfolds through highly embodied urgencies and related drives. Similarly, Brad Haseman (2006) presents a model of performative research that insists on “different approaches to designing, conducting, and reporting research” and can, according to him, more effectively address the methodological needs of non-traditional research projects (1). As a potential alternative to existing quantitative and qualitative paradigms, PBR can be especially useful for those working in and on the arts,

¹¹ For example, in post-production on *Between You and Me*, I was given surprising and welcome access to a collection of pictures of Michael and his family from 1979-present. Only upon encountering these images was I reminded of Roland Barthes’ *punctum*, and therefore able to work backwards from the moving-image text toward theories of the image that (arguably) originated on the page.

¹² Here, I also make connections between Rogoff’s work and feminist histories of mobilizing the personal as a political project.

media, and design (Haseman 2006). As a method, PBR recognizes that research inquiry often necessitates creative outputs that follow non-traditional academic formats (Haseman 2006; Bolt 2008; Rogoff 2006). This project explores the kind of alternative output advocated by/for/in practice-based and performative research to explore queer methods that reflect critical viewing and interpretive practices.

Alternative methods of theoretical inquiry are evident in more traditional cinema and media studies scholarship as well. In *First Person Jewish*, Alisa Lebow (2008) addresses first-person representation of various Jewish identities in film through an examination of autobiographic, ‘first person critical’ work. In similar form, James Baldwin’s *The Devil Finds Work: An Essay* (1976) reflects upon critical race theory and the construction of racialized identities through a critical engagement with racial representation in cinema. These historically significant discursive treatments of both self and community representation provide critical theoretical models for my dissertation work. Both Lebow and Baldwin integrate their own personal subjectivities and work within their broader academic and literary projects. Similarly, as a transgender person writing about trans representations in cinema and new media, I anticipate multiple overlaps between my personal practice and the topics I investigate. Rather than avoid or minimize these connections, I incorporate them when necessary into my critical analysis and critique.

Experimental methodologies are not without their limits. Throughout the project, I endeavor to account for missing pieces, theoretical gaps, and potential problems illuminated by my practice, to suggest further avenues for future inquiry, and to acknowledge the confines and restrictions within methods employed. Moreover, I will draw on established disciplinary methods of critical inquiry – such as incorporating canonical documentary theory into sections of

exploratory writing and making – to supplement my more experimental provocations and investigations.

PROJECT STRUCTURE

My project begins with the work of multi-disciplinary artist Chris Vargas. Working in parody, performance, and digital détournement, trans-identified Vargas provocatively intervenes on contemporary mainstream representations of transgender subjects. Through strategic manipulation of mainstream platforms such as awards shows, reality television series, and news broadcast media, Vargas makes available new ways of knowing and imagining trans representation in public through humour, parody, and campy pop culture critique. Chapter 1, “Your Tools, My House: Chris Vargas and the Politics of Postmodernist Parody,” engages five moving-image works made by Chris Vargas, three of which were made in collaboration.

Extraordinary Pregnancies (2010) is a 10-minute short film by Vargas that revisits the media attention surrounding transgender-identified Thomas Beatie, known as the ‘first’ pregnant man, and his then-wife Nancy. Through re-scripting, strategic cross cutting, and performance for the camera, Vargas reimagines the political potential of the moment through counter-logical narrative framing and parody.

Made in collaboration with Greg Youmans, *Work of Art! Reality TV Special* (2012) places Vargas and Youmans in green-screen enabled competition on Bravo’s *Work of Art: The Next Great Artist*. I employ Linda Hutcheon’s scholarship on postmodernism, parody and double coding (1986), as well as Jack Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) as necessary theoretical guideposts in my analysis.

Established in 2013, the *Museum of Transgender Hirstory & Art (MOTHA)* (2013-Present) is a multi-format utopian (Muñoz 2009) performance platform designed, created, and executed

by Vargas to launch transgender art and cultural production into — and in spite of — the institutional mainstream. I place Vargas' formulation of MOTHA in conversation with artists and collectives who are rearticulating and subverting conventional conceptualizations of the museum and the archive such as Vera Frenkel's *The Institute*, General Idea's *The Pavilion*, and Walid Raad's *The Atlas Group Archive*.

The chapter concludes by considering two collaborative works made by Chris Vargas and Eric A. Stanley: *Homotopia* (2007) and *Criminal Queers* (2013). *Homotopia* narrates the story of a group of radical queer activists conspiring to expose and resist the neoliberal uptake and organizing about gay marriage, and to discuss the violence and threat of homonormativity, while *Criminal Queers* utilizes similar aesthetic tropes to critique the prison-industrial complex. Textual and visual content analysis of the work is positioned alongside interviews with Vargas and Stanley as they discuss methodological and political motivations for the projects and the politicization of their ongoing collaboration.

Chapter 1 and Chapter 3 are bridged by an experimental, conversational engagement with the reality television show *Small Town Security* (2012-2014). Executed with affect scholar Naomi de Szegheo-Lang, we place scholarship about transgender moving-image representation (Halberstam 2005) in conversation with experimental affect-based writing (Cvetkovich 2012; Stewart 2007) to reveal the productive potential of conversation as queer method, which can inform future theorizing about moving-image, gender, sexuality, and intimacy. *Small Town Security* is an American reality television show that aired on the AMC network from July 2012 to June 2014, and was cancelled on account of the ailing health of the show's protagonist, Joan Koplan. Our narrative interstitial argues for alternative forms of familial, queer intimacy and mobilizes a class analysis of reality television to explore the treatment and management of

Dennis Starr, the show's only trans-identified character. As connective project tissue, our conversation about *Small Town Security* sutures the mainstream platforms mobilized in the work of Chris Vargas to broader issues and debates within trans(itioning) communities.

Chapter 3 “Community Dis(Comfort)” focuses on representations of community within trans and gender non-conforming populations, tracking the emergence of documentary feature portraits in the early 2000s – paying specific attention to *Southern Comfort* (2001) and *The Aggressives* (2005) – through responsive digital episodic storytelling projects authored by trans directors such as *Her Story*¹³, and digital animation *The Hawker*¹⁴ on YouTube. José Esteban Muñoz’ *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) provides theoretical foundations for the exploration of trans(itioning) subjects in community.

Next, I integrate a spotlight feature on the work of trans director Sam Feder, alongside a critical interrogation of their two feature length works: *Boy I Am* (2005), and *Kate Bornstein is a Queer and Pleasant Danger* (2014), both of which address historically contentious culture wars within the trans community. The chapter concludes by proposing that the festival-circulated documentary feature has re-emerged in trans media-making circles as a platform for historical re-imagination. Two new films: *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* (2015) and *MAJOR!* (2015) demand that revised and critical attention be paid to significant trans subjects, those often missing from cultural and historical records. While some of these projects are still in post-production at the time of this writing, I ask: what is at stake for trans and gender non-conforming media makers who are looking back at historical representations of trans communities? I join the discussion about mainstream representations of trans(itioning) subjects with activist and community based filmmaking initiatives in moments of shared aesthetic and/or political agenda.

¹³ Link to view: <http://www.herstoryshow.com/>

¹⁴ Link to view: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cWXOPVjKpr8>

The second connective interstitial bridge between sections is a dialogue about my short film *Akin* (2012). Made in 2012, *Akin* utilizes lyrical, poetic documentary styling to tell a story about violence and shared family secrets. In conversation with childhood studies scholar Hannah Dyer, I locate my work alongside the queer experimental documentary filmmaking traditions of Richard Fung's *My Mother's Place* (1990) and Mike Hoolboom's *Mark* (2009). Through an interdisciplinary call and response, Dyer introduces the psychoanalytic scholarship of Oren Gozlan (2014) and Cathy Caruth (1996) to make sense of generational transmissions of trauma and aesthetic treatments of history and memory, while I speak directly to the interrelationship between theoretical practices and art making.

Chapter 4's collaborative musings about *Akin* provide succinct transitional threads to Chapter 5: "Violence: Death, Animation and Reenactment." Historically, violence has been the thematic device, and lived reality, employed by various makers to justify the presence of trans(itioning) subjects in moving-image media. Most notably, the creative trajectories stemming from *The Brandon Teena Story* (1998) propelled a trans murder into an Oscar winning performance in Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999); and subsequently positioned white, American, (trans)masculinities at the center of gendered-violence commentary and debates. In the decade that followed *Boys Don't Cry*, non-fiction treatments of violence against trans(itioning) subjects, such as *Cruel and Unusual* (2006), emerged to address various racialized publics overlooked by white-washed, mainstream media. Formally, I explore the use of reenactment as aesthetic strategy in *Middle Sexes: Redefining He and She* (2005) and *Two Spirits: Sexuality, Gender, and the Murder of Fred Martinez* (2009) by utilizing Bill Nichols' five categories of reenactment, and Augustine Park's scholarship on settler colonialism and indigenous communities. I follow with discussion of Rosa Von Praunheim's *I Am My Own*

Woman (1992), an early example of collaborative reenactment as strategy of both representational refusal and political resistance. Finally, I suggest that Jess Mac's *Feeling Reserved: Alexis' Story* (2011) offers new aesthetic possibilities for representing violence against trans(itioning) subjects. Made in collaboration with indigenous trans women in Saskatchewan, the project employs animation as a strategy of authorial and colonial displacement. Annabelle Honess Roe's scholarship on animated documentary offers critical insight into the use of animation as a political and narrative strategy.

TRANSITIONING PUBLICS concludes with a written thinking-through of the practice-based component of my project, and positions *Between You and Me* as both emblematic of my theoretical framework, and as a necessary extension of debates beyond the confines and limitations of academic pages. Inspired by the theoretical call in trans studies to move beyond the potentially limiting relationship between "trans-" and "-gender," *Between You and Me* employs hybrid research practice as a platform to challenge these formal and disciplinary distinctions. Two versions of the film script are included in the chapter to help illustrate the development of the project over time, and to provide critical visual space for Michael's hand-written interventions into the project making, sent from prison. Employing the scholarship of Patricia Zimmerman (1995) and Marsha and Devin Orgeron (2007) on home movies, Roland Barthes on photography (1957, 1981), and Gayle Rubin on moral panics (1984), *Between You and Me* emerges as both an example of, and an exception to, theoretical and cinematic precedents set both by and for trans(itioning) subjects in moving-image media.

CHAPTER ONE: YOUR TOOLS, MY HOUSE
Chris Vargas and the Politics of Postmodernist Parody

For millennia, the patriarchy had *history*. For a few years in the 1970s, some white feminists had *herstory*. And now, transgender people finally have a gender-neutral *hirstory*, all their own.

- Chris Vargas
Executive Director, *Museum of Transgender Hirstory & Art*

Working in parody, performance, and digital détournement, trans-identified multidisciplinary artist Chris Vargas provocatively intervenes upon mainstream representations of transgender subjects to offer alternative, and often-satirical, histories. Through parodic, campy manipulation of mainstream platforms such as awards shows, posters, reality television, and news broadcast media, Vargas makes available new ways of knowing and imagining trans representation in public through humour and pop culture critique. Writing in 1986, Linda Hutcheon asserts that postmodernist parody works as doubly coded and politically charged, “to both legitimize and subvert that which it parodies” (101). In contrast to Frederic Jameson’s articulation of postmodernism as that which can de-historicize the present and/or render it apolitical, empty pastiche, Hutcheon’s considerations charge postmodernism with capacities for critique. This chapter considers five moving-image texts made by Vargas and his collaborators, and situates his work within legacies of feminist cultural production and video making. Utilizing Audre Lorde’s now famous charge “The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House” (1984), I consider whether Vargas’ parodic mobilization of technological tools of the mainstream can in fact re-imagine, re-interpret, and re-distribute political and representational power.

For Hutcheon, postmodernist parody becomes a vehicle to acknowledge politics and histories of representation. She notes that many strategies of postmodern parodic engagement

used by feminist artists and artists of colour “point to the history and historical power of those cultural representations, while ironically contextualizing both in such a way as to deconstruct them” (102). Intersectional approaches to critical inquiry and artistic creation are foregrounded by many feminist writers and media-makers that seek to create new pathways for visual representation both within and against the mainstream.¹⁵ Often manifesting resistance techniques in the form of campy counter-narrative and pop cultural intervention, Chris Vargas gestures to the legacy of early feminist film and video makers at the heart of his contemporary work.

In the edited collection, *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, Moe Meyer defines camp and/or “queer¹⁶ parody” as an activist strategy that is political, queer and embodying of cultural critique. Meyer contends that the queer subject produces previously inaccessible social visibility and representation through camp as an aestheticized method. For Vargas, the emancipatory and politicized potentials of camp alongside feminist film and video making provide integral launch pads for artistic intervention, and have resulted in the creation and ongoing evolution of projects such as the online news media intervention *Extraordinary Pregnancies* (2010), the collaborative reality television re-imagination *Work of Art! Reality TV Special* (2012), the radical DIY video projects *Homotopia* (2006) and *Criminal Queers* (2013), and the multidisciplinary performance and activist initiative *The Museum of Transgender Hirstory and Art (MOTHA)* (2013-present). Through textual analysis and conversation with the media-maker, I consider various strategies of artistic and political engagement, and return to Linda Hutcheon’s work on postmodernist parody for theoretical framing. Much like text on

¹⁵ See *The Watermelon Woman* by Cheryl Dunye (1996), *Dyketactics* (1974) by Barbara Hammer, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) Martha Rosler, and *Born in Flames* (1983) by Lizzie Borden.

¹⁶ Of particular note is Meyer’s steadfastly essentialist definition of queer as both category and theory. For Meyer, the ‘unqueer’ only access camp through means of appropriation (eg. Susan Sontag). See “Introduction: Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp” in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, 1994, p 1-2.

screen in many documentary films, each analysis of Vargas' work is introduced by a block quote from Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History*. In service of my cross-disciplinary encounters with both moving-image and written texts, I wonder how text "on page/screen" prior to engagements with conversation about moving image can inform and complement the reading. Similarly, I seek to expand upon the definitive and overlapping potentials of double coding in this context, and the potentially generative mobility of meaning assigned not only to Vargas' work, but also to the contexts of transness upon which it is both responsive and reliant.

EXTRAORDINARY PREGNANCIES (2010)

Postmodernist parody, be it in architecture, literature, painting, film, or music, uses its historical memory, its aesthetic introversion, to signal that this kind of self-reflexive discourse is always inextricably bound to social discourse.

– Hutcheon, 204

Extraordinary Pregnancies is a 10-minute short film by Vargas that revisits the media attention surrounding transgender-identified Thomas Beatie, known as the 'first' pregnant man, and his then wife Nancy. Pregnant in 2007, Thomas Beatie launched the possibility of male pregnancy into the mainstream imaginary after writing a first-person column about his experiences in the LGBT magazine *The Advocate*. In April 2008, Beatie was talking about his life on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and by November of that same year, he was sitting down with Barbara Walters for ABC. *Extraordinary Pregnancies* re-stages dialogue from the Barbara Walters interview, with Vargas playing, and therefore speaking for, and as, Thomas Beatie. Through re-scripting, strategic cross cutting, and performance for the camera, Vargas re-imagines the political potential of the moment through counter-narrative framing and parody.

Transgender people have long been burdened by the formulaic curiosity and intrusions of

television talk show interviews. From Christine Jorgensen on Joe Pyne in 1966,¹⁷ to author and activist Kate Bornstein on *Donahue* in the early 90s, and Caitlyn Jenner with Diane Sawyer on *ABC News* in 2015,¹⁸ the questions asked of trans people in public often remain the same. Who are you, how did you come to be this way, do you think it is (you are) normal, and what are the rest of us supposed to do and think? *Extraordinary Pregnancies* begins with a stock-footage montage of news headlines and a commentator who exclaims: “There are newspaper headlines you thought you would never see: Dogs Talk, Aliens Invade, Paris Hilton Wins Nobel Prize, and Man Gets Pregnant.” Stranger than the misogynistic assumption that celebrity women are smart enough to win intellectual awards, and/or the reality that canine animals do in fact know how to communicate, is the supposition that men — a socially constructed and inhabited category of identification and potential



living — can get pregnant. Vargas cuts to reaction shots from an unknown, supposedly American, white, working-class public; one person remarks: “Did he get himself pregnant?” Another adds: “I’m hoping it catches on with men around the world.”

As news media outlets were quick to rely on a photo of Beatie’s surgically reconstructed chest and pregnant belly for supposed visual verification of the anomaly, Vargas knowingly subverts and subsequently denies our ability to re-view the image by replacing Beatie’s head

¹⁷ Link to view: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fyh8BxPxtnw>

¹⁸ Link to view: <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/video/bruce-jenner-interview-diane-sawyer-woman-part-30572231>

with his own in *Extraordinary Pregnancies*. In the re-staged interview setting, Vargas performs earnest, compassionate answers to questions that he delivers from Beatie's original video verbatim; however in moments of re-scripted dialogue, we bear witness to Vargas' biting, campy, controlled, and often humorous critique. When Walters challenges Beatie by asking "Aren't you trying to have it both ways?" Vargas seethingly responds, "I don't believe there are just two ways to have... it."¹⁹

Walters pivots quickly from attempting to determine the facts and legitimacy of Beatie's circumstances, to an exploration of "profit" related to the decision of he and his partner to go public. After his child's birth, Beatie published *Labor of Love: The Story of One Man's Extraordinary Pregnancy* (2008), sold photographs, and continued to make media appearances. Walters remarks "We should point out that we are not paying you for this interview" to which Vargas as Beatie responds sharply "No, sadly you're not." The commodification of Beatie's story for purposes of tabloid news media is rendered invisible by the facade of objective reporting as framed by the Barbara Walters interview. When conversation about Beatie's body begins again, Vargas first rejects, but then ultimately answers the questions, revealing that both he, and therefore Beatie, are never fully in control of their public circumstances. *Extraordinary Pregnancies* remains hyper aware of its failures; just as Vargas the artist takes power back and away from the interview setting, Beatie the subject remains in contact with the reality of Barbara Walters and her pedantic reductivity.

Writing about publics and counterpublics, Michael Warner asks, "For whom does one write or speak?" (128). For Chris Vargas in *Extraordinary Pregnancies*, the answer to that question is ever-changing. At the conclusion of the Barbara Walters interview, Vargas breaks

¹⁹ In the Barbara Walters interview, Beatie responds by saying "Well first of all, what would be wrong with that?"

character and turns to the camera for a final direct address: “I want people to understand that if I fail you, if I fail to inspire passion and empathy in you, if I fail to represent you as a man, as a trans man, as a husband, as a father; well, you also fail me. You fail to expand your definition of normal. But give it time, I’m young and I’m determined, and I’m going to keep having extraordinary pregnancies until my womb dries up. So go Fuck yourself, America... And buy my book.”

The mainstream media-manufacturing of hyperbolic stories, the sensational treatment of one’s supposed singularity, and the biological process of child-birth all remain extraordinary processes, indeed; meanwhile, Chris Vargas leaves us with one final, necessary video dedication: “for Thomas.”

WORK OF ART! REALITY TV SPECIAL (2012)

Parody seems to offer a perspective on the present and the past which allows an artist to speak TO a discourse from WITHIN it, but without being totally recuperated by it. Parody appears to have become, for this reason, the mode of the marginalized, or of those who are fighting marginalization by a dominant ideology.
– Hutcheon, 206

Made in collaboration with Greg Youmans, *Work of Art! Reality TV Special* is a parody that places Vargas and Youmans in green-screen enabled competition on Bravo’s *Work of Art: The Next Great Artist*. For the purpose of clarity in my writing here, Bravo’s original show will be referred to as *The Next Great Artist* while Vargas and Youmans’ intervention will be referred to as *Reality TV Special*.

The Next Great Artist is an elimination-based reality television program wherein contestants make art projects in hopes of securing prizes and career visibility. The show feels familiar in its mobilization of diversity rhetoric, amateur enthusiasm, and commodified

outsiderness wherein contestants are caricatured into categories and stereotypes. In *Reality TV Special*, the fake becomes politicized digital strategy²⁰ as Vargas and Youmans transplant themselves onto the screen, and into conversation with judges and other contestants through campy voiceover and a related suspension of viewer (dis)belief. The project is part of a 9-part digital video series co-directed by Vargas and Youmans called *Falling in Love...with Chris and Greg*, which frequently positions the couple in circumstances of exaggerated opposition as a way to comment on contemporary debates in queer culture. Whether fractures between liberal and radical politics, or tensions between cis and trans identities, *Falling in Love* stages intimate dialogue between characters (Chris and Greg) as a way in which to create expansive dialogue between broader viewing publics.



The opening sequence of *Reality TV Special* introduces Vargas and Youmans as singular entities competing in a group context to produce a successful piece of queer art about failure. Enthused by the prospects — while gesturing to insider knowledge of Jack Halberstam’s 2011

²⁰ See YES MEN’s ongoing practice: <http://yeslab.org/>

book *The Queer Art of Failure* — the characters perform interpretations of the challenge and become quickly disillusioned by the show's socio-political constraints. Viewers watch as Chris and Greg (the characters) push back on the rules from within the show, and Vargas and Youmans (the artists) reject the entire premise. When Andy Warhol is introduced to the group as a stylistic guide for the challenge, Vargas and Youmans ventriloquize the judge's narration, offering commentary on the mediocrity of Warhol's work²¹ and gesturing to his latent, albeit known, sexuality.²²

Cut to an audience of affirmatively nodding contestants.

In his first talking-head testimonial segment, Chris states that queers have been failing forever, and references the experimental film legacy of Jack Smith. Fans of queer cinema history will note the proximity between Warhol and Smith in this conversation, understanding that while the artists worked together in the 60s, Smith actively rejected Warhol's enmeshment with celebrity, wealth, and prestige (See: *Jack Smith and the Destruction of Atlantis*, 2007). A campy, avant-garde artist who abhorred capitalist structures of art production and related consumption, Jack Smith is emblematic of Vargas' countercultural critique. Where *The Next Great Artist* offers Warhol as a mainstream exemplar, Vargas and Youmans counter with the anti-mainstream Jack Smith. Amongst the many queer theorists both mobilized and gestured to in *Reality TV Special*, Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* offers theoretical footholds for Vargas and

²¹ In his 1999 essay "Getting the Warhol You Deserve," Douglas Crimp argues for Warhol's significance in cultural studies on account of his work's ability to address various populist and artistic impulses simultaneously. For Crimp, Warhol's cultural complexity requires viewers to re-negotiate the terms of their artistic values and sensibilities.

²² Further elaboration of Warhol as queer subject can be found in *Queer Warhol* (1996) edited by Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José Esteban Muñoz. The collection of essays approach Warhol's queerness from a variety of disciplinary positions: cinema studies, psychoanalysis, feminist studies, critical race theory and art history.

Youmans' creation. For Halberstam, failure is re-framed as productive and then positioned "as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique" (88). He continues, "As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities" (88). As a form of oppositional power, Halberstam invites connections to feminism as a method of refusal.

Formally, *The Next Great Artist* mirrors Halberstam's musings via tongue-in-cheek manifestations of serious critique. During the initial round of character profiling on the show, Greg is introduced as an 'Academic Temp'. As someone working across artistic and academic disciplines, Greg's occupational designation references the lack of sustainable and secure employment available to contract teachers in North America²³ as well as the systemic barriers faced by queer and trans people in the workplace (Schilt 2010). Chris is introduced as 'Permanently on Strike', signaling queer and trans activist labor so often unrecognized by broader institutionalized circuits of credit and compensation (McRuer 2013).

If Vargas and Youmans are the Jack Smiths²⁴ of *Reality TV Special*, Young Sun Han – the self-identified queer contestant of color on *The Next Great Artist* – is the Andy Warhol. Han's contribution to the art challenge is a large pop art advertisement for Prop 8, the proposition to ban gay marriage in California in 2010. Han's work is stripped of political import, further reinforced by his admission that he did "not want to make a specific comment one way or the

²³ See Melonie Fullick writing for *The Globe and Mail*: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/education/who-will-hire-all-the-phds-not-canadas-universities/article10976412/> and Jordan Weissman writing for *Slate*: http://www.slate.com/blogs/moneybox/2015/03/23/academic_job_market_still_terrifying.html

²⁴ Writing about the work of Jack Smith and John Waters, Nicholas de Villiers defines camp as a distinctly queer avant-garde tradition employed by artists as a form of queer survival. For further exploration, see: "The Vanguard and the Most Articulate Audience: Queer Camp, Jack Smith and John Waters." In *FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts* 4. 2007.

other” about the issues. The neoliberal “It Gets Better” Project²⁵ style motivations foregrounded by and through Han’s contribution are ultimately countered by the project creations offered by Chris and Greg.

Chris proposes to make a piece of queer art about failure that focuses on Chaz Bono, the first trans competitor on ABC’s reality-show *Dancing with the Stars*,²⁶ the child of Cher and Sonny Bono, and one of the first famous trans men in the contemporary moment to transition to much publicity. With a professed affinity for ‘trans people in the public eye’, Chris approaches Bono as a public figure who is set up to fail on account of mainstream expectations placed on trans bodies to fully embody conventional expectations around gendered identity. In his critique, Vargas relies on at least cursory understandings of gender, power and performance, and thus locates the viewing public in one of two locations: a) with him, knowingly in conversation and aware of necessary critiques, or b) with the judge, ignorant of the stereotypes and therefore part of the problematic public.

In another campy voiceover intervention, Vargas and Youmans ventriloquize various stereotypes about trans people through the lips of the judges, inspired by Chris’ project. Statements such as: “Is it true you can tell [if a person is trans] by looking at their feet?” and “Oh yes, she’s a tranny” illuminate the failure of trans literacy on the show, and in broader contemporary television publics at that time. Of layered impact is the knowledge that the stereotypes attached to Chris the character are also being thrust upon Vargas the openly trans-identified creator; thus, the context of *Reality TV Special* might reflect trajectories of — and/or resistances to — Vargas’ career. Is Vargas identifying with the failures he attributes to Bono?

²⁵ For critiques of It Gets Better, see: Jasbir Puar writing for *The Guardian* – <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/nov/16/wake-it-gets-better-campaign>, and Tavia Nyong’o writing for *Bully Bloggers* – <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2010/09/30/school-daze/>.

²⁶ See Elizabeth Flock writing for *The Washington Post*: https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/blogpost/post/chaz-bono-on-dancing-with-the-stars-puts-transgender-rights-in-spotlight/2011/09/01/gIQAIMj2uJ_blog.html

Does Vargas even desire the types of mainstream inclusion that Bono is seeking? Ultimately, Chris elects to speed up the footage of Chaz Bono in his final presentation to obscure the potential for future viewer scrutiny, and titles the work ‘Small Hands, Small Feet’. Greg presents his project ‘Preoccupied’ to the judges, a pencil crayon drawing of queer melancholy, ambivalence, and sharp parody featuring soft-core gay porn, the Occupy movement, and ‘cat’ from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961). Youmans’ earnest presentation of his pencil crayon drawing rejects the formalist imperatives and techniques of much of the mainstream art world, and subversively mimics the self-satisfied-summary of many *The Next Great Artist* contestants.

The conclusion of the episode calls Chris, Greg, and (real contestant) Young for final critique — one artist will win the competition, and two will be sent home. Added to the judge’s roster for critique is Rob Pruitt, the American post-conceptual artist responsible for creating “The Andy Monument,” a ten-foot-tall chrome statue of Warhol resurrected outside of the building that housed the Factory in the 70s and 80s. Pruitt is the invited expert, however no mention of “The Andy Monument” is present in the show; rather Vargas and Youmans ventriloquize Pruitt as “a guest homosexual artist,” both trivializing and highlighting the tokenistic nature of both Pruitt’s presence, and Young’s inevitable future win.

Chris and Greg, much like Chaz Bono and Jack Smith, are destined to fail *Reality TV Special* on account of the commodified expectations of their identificatory positions. To be gay and/or trans on reality TV requires an adherence to codes. To resist tokenization is to be denied the luxury of social, and therefore monetary, acceptance. When explaining various reasons for his loss, judges suggest that Chris could have made himself more vulnerable, a known request of those othered in and by mainstream spaces. If only we could understand you better, then we would let you in. Young concludes “for an artist, visibility is life,” and no dubbing was needed

by Vargas and Youmans to further highlight *The Next Great Artist* as a project of queer and trans erasure, and to spotlight how the legacies of queer artistic histories that have been obscured over time. Through humour and parody, *The Next Great Artist* becomes a subversive vehicle of critique, of the contemporary art world, of LGBT mainstreaming, and of legitimized quests for social and political participation.

HOMOTOPIA (2006) and CRIMINAL QUEERS (2013)

If the self-conscious formalism of modernism in many of the arts led to the isolation of art from the social context, postmodernism's even more self-reflexive parodic formalism reveals that it is language or discourse *as form* that is what is intimately connected to social discourse.
– Hutcheon, 206

Homotopia is 26-minute short film made by Chris Vargas and Eric A. Stanley²⁷ that tells the story of a group of radical queer activists conspiring to expose and resist the neoliberal uptake and organizing about gay marriage, as a way to discuss the violence and threat of homonormativity.²⁸ The film mirrors critical and ongoing questions asked by, for, and within the LGBT community; for example, “What about people who get married for health benefits and stuff?” Within their critique, Vargas and Stanley argue that everyone needs health care, rather than gay marriage, and that the momentum of related LGBT activism and organizing is misplaced and misused. After *Homotopia*, Vargas and Stanley collaborated on *Criminal Queers* (2013), a second attempt to address and critique the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian politics, with specific attention paid to the prison-industrial complex. In conversation with Yasmin Nair for Bitch Media, Vargas and Stanley discuss their aesthetic and political approach, and offer

²⁷ Eric. A Stanley is an assistant professor in the Department of Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University of California, Riverside and a co-editor of *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex* (2011).

²⁸ For further scholarship on homonormativity, see Duggan (2002). For additional moving-image intervention, see John Greyson's *The Battle of Roy and Silo* (2011), a campy, operatic critique of same-sex marriage starring gay penguins.

connections between the works.

Eric Stanley: When we toured with *Homotopia*, people would ask us ‘If gay marriage isn’t the fight we should be fighting, what should we be doing?’ Working toward the abolition of prisons seems to be a good start.²⁹



The films appropriate the DIY anti-aesthetic and urgency of many ACT UP and AIDS activist videos of the 1980s-90s.³⁰ Continuing in conversation with Nair, Vargas and Stanley lament the reductive and insular capacities of the contemporary LGBT film festival circuit, and assert radicalized desires to disrupt the current climate of “Queer Cinema,” which they summarize as being nothing more than propaganda for the homonationalist LGBT agenda.³¹ For Vargas and Stanley, camp aesthetics become methods through which they can diffuse and then re-draw attention to political anxieties. At times, conversation between the filmmakers feels resonant of early agitations by filmmakers identified with New Queer Cinema (NQC), artists that actively confronted the lack of relevant and politicized representations of LGBT people in the industrial

²⁹ See “Queers on the Run” by Yasmin Nair writing for *Bitch Media*: <https://bitchmedia.org/article/queers-on-the-run>

³⁰ See Gregg Bordowitz and Douglas Crimp (1987)

³¹ For further work on homonationalism see Puar (2007), Kouri-Towe (2012)

mainstream in the early 1990s.³² Like many makers of NQC,³³ Vargas and Stanley embrace trash, camp, and imperfection³⁴ as necessary tools of aesthetic production and related critique. Moreover, the production between the pair extends beyond the confines of a single screen. Stanley remarks, “We believe in the context of the entire performance of the film, which includes us presenting it and initiating discussions of the film and its issues.”³⁵

Gender transgression plays a key role in *Criminal Queers* as a method through which to highlight the management and regulation of gender non-conforming bodies by the prison-industrial-complex. Embedded within their critique is recognition of the ongoing momentum behind the construction of an ideal trans subject in North America; one who is passing, recognized, and legitimated by a binary gender system. Intertextual references to both contemporary and historical debates within trans communities abound in Vargas and Stanley’s work, a key example being the placement of Janice Raymond’s disreputable and transphobic book, *The Transsexual Empire* (1979), in conversation with organizing agendas of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC). The radical juxtaposition of conflicting political ideologies is prominent and pronounced in historical feminist and AIDS activist cinemas.³⁶ In pursuit of these public dialogues and related changes, Stanley concludes, “We try to make hyper-visible the connections that people don’t always see.”

³² Originally clustered by B. Ruby Rich as a way to account for the proliferation of independent queer features in the mainstream festival circuit, theory making about New Queer Cinema as a genre was unstable and fleeting. For further writing beyond Rich, see Michele Aaron *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader* (2004)

³³ To explore key contributions to New Queer Cinema see Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston* (1989), Todd Haynes’s *Poison* (1991), Derek Jarman’s *Edward II* (1991), and Gregg Araki’s *The Living End* (1992).

³⁴ See “For an imperfect cinema” by Julio García Espinosa, translated by Julianne Burton in *Jump Cut*, no. 20, 1979 and Hito Steyerl’s *In Defense of the Poor Image* on e-flux for articulations of necessary re-use and re-imagination.

³⁵ *Queers on the Run* by Yasmin Nair <https://bitchmedia.org/article/queers-on-the-run>

³⁶ See John Greyson’s *Zero Patience* (1993) which places the urban legend of “patient zero” as articulated in Randy Shilts’s *And The Band Played On* (1987) in conversation with AIDS activist histories and strategies of resistance.

MUSEUM OF TRANSGENDER HISTORY & ART (MOTHA) (2013-PRESENT)

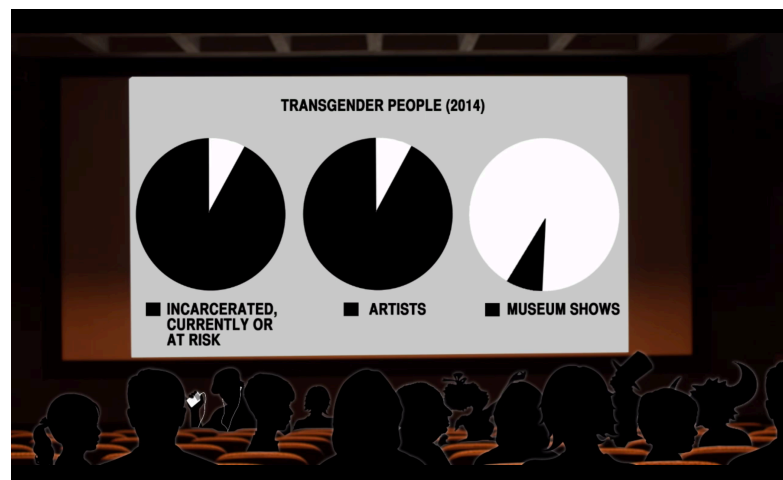
MOTHA is dedicated to moving the history and art of transgender people to the center of public life. The preeminent institution of its kind, the museum insists on an expansive and unstable definition of transgender, one that is able to encompass all trans and gender non-conformed art and artists. MOTHA is committed to developing a robust exhibition and programming schedule that will enrich the transgender mythos both by exhibiting works by living artists and by honoring the heroes and transcestors that have come before. Pending the construction of MOTHA, the museum will function as a series of autonomous off-site experiences in North America and throughout the world.

- Chris Vargas

Executive Director, *Museum of Transgender History & Art*

Established in 2013, MOTHA is a multi-format, utopian (Muñoz 2009), parodic performance platform designed, created, and executed by Chris Vargas to launch transgender art and cultural production into — and in spite of — the institutional mainstream. Borrowing recognizable pop culture formats such as award shows, gallery exhibitions, and public speaking styles, Vargas showcases lost, forgotten, and underrepresented trans-identified artists and histories in often satirical and re-appropriated fashion. As the self-appointed Executive Director of the museum/project, Vargas creates space to think publicly about institutional practices of inclusion and exclusion related specifically to transgender cultural production. Vargas notes, “by self-appointing myself as ED I

hope to diffuse power by simply inhabiting it. If I can call myself a museum director, and if I can help grant legitimacy to trans artists by having their work associated with



a cultural institution, then anyone can.”

Vargas’ formulation of MOTHA sits in critical conversation with various artists and collectives who are rearticulating and subverting conventional conceptualizations of the museum and the archive, by trafficking in fetishized impressions and legacies of historical proof. Vera Frenkel’s *The Institute (Or What We Do For Love)* is an online interdisciplinary hub for practicing artists over the age of 50, managed by former employees of agencies such as the CBC and the NFB, which offers public engagements such as talks, radio broadcasts, and newsletter services. General Idea’s *The Pavilion* was an imagined space manifest through a series of design plans, models, photographs, and articles and displayed in the late 1970s that embodied tensions between fictional, hypothetical, and never fully realized spaces. Writing about the Myth of Inhabitation, Phillip Monk of the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU) comments that General Idea’s “strategies have more to do with the manipulation of a sign system than with the material production of art objects themselves.”³⁷ Reporting on the AGYU’s restaging of two General Idea shows under the title *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion*, art critic Gabrielle Moser asks, “What are the implications of adopting re-enactment not just as a mode of artistic production (a well-worn strategy for contemporary artists in recent years), but rather as a curatorial and institutional strategy?”³⁸ *The Pavilion*, like much of Vargas’ work, affords spectators an ability to look back at a lack. Likewise, Lebanese contemporary media artist Walid Raad’s creation of *The Atlas Group* in 1999 was an imaginary – though tangible – foundation constructed to prioritize, research, and re-imagine Lebanon’s war history. Like General Idea, Raad’s initiatives employ photographs, moving-image media, and archival strategies such as

³⁷ Quoted from Gabrielle Moser’s essay: <http://fillip.ca/content/the-1984-miss-general-idea-pavilion>

³⁸ *ibid.*

information collection, management, and presentation in the development of new authorities about untold histories.

Parody has perhaps come to be a privileged mode of formal self-reflexivity because its paradoxical incorporation of the past into its very structures often points to these ideological contexts somewhat more obviously, more didactically, than other forms.

– Hutcheon, 206

Initially made for *Dirty Looks*, a monthly platform for Queer Experimental Video in New York City, Chris Vargas stars in 3 short-format video speech presentations as Executive Director of MOTH A, which extend the scope and intention of the project. *Introducing the Museum of Transgender Hirstory & Art* elaborates upon the mission of MOTH A, which is to preserve the legacy of trans cultural production without bowing to liberal notions of inclusion and assimilation broadcast by ready-made institutional structures. Understanding that such institutions were not designed to prioritize trans-centered thinking and related work, Vargas contends that most often, such structures actually contribute to the marginalization, tokenization, and erasure of trans content. Vargas notes, “It’s true that broad exposure can help educate some, but it simultaneously makes the most marginalized among us even more vulnerable.” In the creation of new structures, even that of his own, Vargas remains weary of processes of exclusion. MOTH A’s unstable definition of itself and lack of secure cultural real estate becomes a strategy to accommodate these necessary tensions.

In *Keynote Speaker of the 2014 Conference on the Imagined Future of Museums*, Vargas announces the future construction of a MOTH A-themed restaurant on Cherry Grove, Fire Island. One of two gay beach communities off New York’s Long Island, Fire Island and its sibling beach, the Pines, are home to historical modernist gay elite, or as Vargas aptly summarizes, “lots of white guys.” To his imagined public, Vargas recounts an event in July of 1976 wherein drag

and recent homecoming queen Terry Warren traveled from Cherry Grove to the Pines only to be refused service. “The Invasion of the Pines” is an annual crusade between beaches that commemorates Warren’s return to the Pines with many of her gender non-conforming friends in protest, forever emblematic of the ongoing class and gender struggle against and within traditionally cis-gay male spaces. The restaurant — framed similarly in logo and style to The Hard Rock Café — boasts transgender memorabilia behind plexiglass and a menu wherein “transgender performers will always dine for free, and be served higher quality food than the other patrons.” Vargas’ continued construction of trans-priority spaces — fantastical in concept,



yet tangible in performance reality — call to question legacies of fame and special treatment often afforded to upper class, white, cisgender bodies, and link the protest at the Pines to histories of public transgender rebellion in other spaces

such as the Stonewall Inn (1969) and the riots at Compton’s Cafeteria (1966).³⁹

In *Building Design*, Vargas turns his attention to the structural components of MOTH A’s fictional imagining. Previously, Vargas has identified MOTH A in conversation with other museums that attempt to account for excluded collections such as the African Diaspora, women, and UFO Research. In doing so, Vargas subversively re-emphasizes the lack of inclusion of these communities by large, heavily funded cultural institutions, and further foregrounds the fetishistic and flattening nature of some collecting practices when these communities are in fact exhibited.⁴⁰

³⁹ See: *Screaming Queens: The Riots at Compton’s Cafeteria* (2005) dir. Susan Stryker

⁴⁰ UFO’s included.

Building Design begins and ends with a conversation about gender-neutral bathrooms, “the least and most of our problems” for gender non-conforming people, according to Vargas. In prioritizing bathroom speak, Vargas is able to highlight issues of access impacting trans people in public spaces, and to connect his work to other projects being made about similar issues such as *Toilet Training*, the 2003 film by Tara Mateik and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project. With the introduction of ‘gender spectrum bathrooms’, Vargas invites viewers to consider the failures of a binary bathroom set-up, and encourages participation in a choose-your-own-adventure style bathroom system. As with *Work of Art! Reality TV Special*, Vargas speaks to multiple audiences simultaneously: crowds of those already familiar with codes and trans-specific points-of-view, and general publics, many of whom may not have encountered such issues and explanations. Never without a self-reflexive nod to his own limitations, Vargas concludes by announcing that there will be a bathroom for those who do not identify on the spectrum as well; his delivery is serious, deadpan, and funny.

American psychiatrist George Eman Vaillant classifies humour as a defense mechanism, one that allows actors to call things out as they actually see fit (1986). Vaillant makes a compelling distinction between humor and wit, emphasizing that witticism is in fact a mobilization of humor to discuss that which is serious and distressing. Wit employed throughout Vargas’ oeuvre provides necessary comic relief, but like parody for Hutcheon, remains double coded. For every moment of relief in Vargas’ work, there is a realization of devastating social and political exclusions, violence, and neglect affecting trans people and trans communities. As a result, his work remains charged by an unavoidable urgency.

MOTHA’s Mission Statement concludes: “Pending the construction of MOTHA, the museum will function as a series of autonomous off-site experiences in North America and

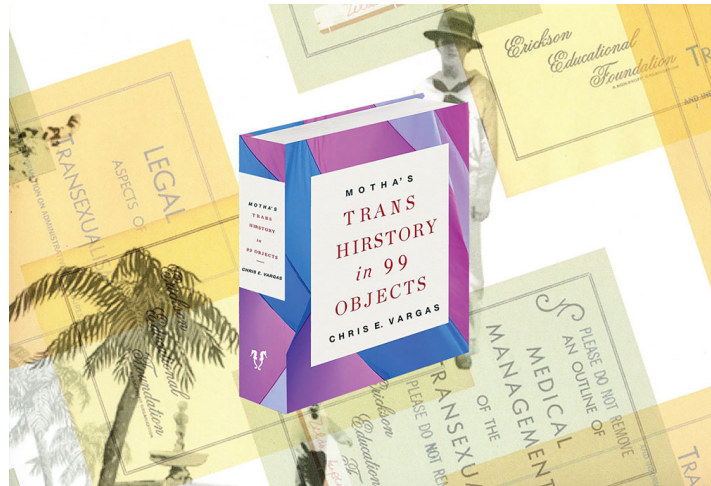
throughout the world.” In service of Vargas’ vision for a trans-prioritized future, one that is continually changing and accommodating of necessary political and institutional and community oriented shifts, the construction of MOTHA will most certainly always be pending. In a recent conversation, Vargas remarked, “In the few years since launching MOTHA I’ve seen how people respond to the authoritative-ness of the project. I get lots of email from artists requesting inclusion, and I haven’t yet figured out how to respond because I like that MOTHA exists as a place in peoples’ imaginations.”⁴¹ Never a more fitting problem to encounter, as the power of Vargas’ aesthetic interventions lies in the knowledge of alternative possibility and power to intervene and exist.

For Chris Vargas, mainstream discourses such as institutions, competitions, and confessionals provide the conditions for, and platforms upon which, his parodic artistic and aesthetic address can sit. The punctuation and abbreviation of content in the mainstream provides fertile ground to re-encounter and re-imagine possibilities of trans representation in public. Many paratextual assumptions about reality allow Vargas’ work to remain so salient, namely ongoing climates of homophobia and transphobia impacting trans(itioning) people. Critical attention paid to the ‘first pregnant man’ results in a meditation on mainstream news media and manipulation of the press in *Extraordinary Pregnancies*. Conscious intersectional approaches to systemic barriers facing transgender and non-conforming people in environments of artistic exhibition enable the construction and continued articulation of a utopian project born of collective imagination called *The Museum of Transgender Hirstory & Art*. Ambivalent political agitation arising from queer content presented on mainstream television inspires *Work of Art! Reality TV Special*, and urgent and ongoing debates within communities manifest through collaboration in

⁴¹ E-mail conversation with the artist, August 22, 2015

Homotopia and Criminal Queers.

At the time of this writing, Vargas' work is expanding. In March 2015, the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives⁴² in Los Angeles exhibited *Transgender Hirstory in 99 Objects: Legends and Mythologies*, “a



visual, material and theoretical exploration of objects that hold significance in narrating the history of transgender communities, as well as a creative and critical engagement with existing LGBTQ archives.”⁴³ Here, Vargas continues to blur the lines between the real and the imagined, drawing upon the intertextual significance of the Smithsonian’s book *American History in 101 Objects* which was inspired by *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, co-manifest by the BBC and the British Museum. Like his many moving-image interventions, Vargas mobilizes *99 Objects* as a reminder of our many missing and contradictory histories, while remaining steadfast in his pursuit of new publics and necessary futures.

⁴² The project was also made with support from the USC Libraries.

⁴³ Quote taken from the introduction to the show catalogue essay authored by Vargas, page 3.

CHAPTER TWO: QUEER INTIMACIES AND CONVERSATION AS METHOD

AMC's *Small Town Security* with Naomi de Szegheo-Lang

Structurally determined by interruption, shifts in perspective, metonymic displacements, and the giving up of control, conversation complicates the prestige of autonomy and the fiction of authorial sovereignty by introducing the unpredictability of moving in relation to another.

– Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, Or the Unbearable*, x

PROLOGUE

I met Naomi de Szegheo-Lang in 2010 at a graduate student orientation for the Gender, Feminist and Women's Studies program at York University. While we both continue to work broadly on intersecting issues related to gender, feminism, and artistic cultural production, our graduate work has settled in different locations, mine within trans studies and cinema and media studies, and Naomi's within critical studies of affect and intimacy. Together, we remain invested in cross-disciplinary modes of collaboration, and have long sought a critical object of study that might prove beneficial for our separate albeit aligned thinking. Through dialogic engagement with AMC's reality television show *Small Town Security* (2012-2014), we endeavour to build upon legacies of thinkers collaboratively discussing social issues, by placing scholarship about transgender moving-image representation (Halberstam 2005) in conversation with experimental affect-based writing (Cvetkovich 2012; Stewart 2007), to reveal the productive potential of conversation as queer method, which can inform future theorizing about moving-image, gender, sexuality, and intimacy. We collectively believe that process-based collaborative thinking is a productive way to move beyond the singularity of one's personal expression, as it offers a productive way to experiment with viewing publics, revealing the reality that our ideas are not often formed in isolation.

Inspired by the cross-disciplinary, conversational theory making of Lisa Duggan and José Muñoz (2009), James Baldwin and Audre Lorde (1984), and Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman (2013), we approach this writing as both an experiment, and as an articulation of collaborative methodological inquiry. From our institutional locations within film studies, trans studies, affect, and queer theory, we take up Berlant and Edelman’s assertion that all relationality “puts into play reaction, accommodation, transference, exchange, and the articulation of narratives” (viii) on account of our proximity to, and engagement with, various forms of intimacy. The instability and responsiveness required for conversation remains generative to me methodologically, in that it inherently disrupts the imperative of solo-authored authority, and positions gut-responses and reaction in opposition to more familiar and celebrated forms of academic writing.



CONVERSATION

Chase: I first encountered *Small Town Security* in 2013, while sitting with a dog named Traylor in a living room in North Berkeley. My friends suggested I watch an episode on account of my broad, interrelated academic and artistic interests in transgender cultural production. They were enthusiastically convinced of the show's merit, excited to hear my opinions, and admittedly often confused by their post-viewing feelings. *Small Town Security* is an American reality television show that focused on a small, family-run security company in Ringgold, Georgia named JJK Security and aired on AMC from July 2012 to June 2014. Owned by Joan "the Chief" Koplan and her husband Irwin "the Major," JJK makes home in a small office-like trailer surrounded by country roads and ample parking. Alongside the Koplans, we meet Brian Taylor, a process-server who is soon to be engaged; Christa Stephens, a secretary and licensed cosmetologist; and Dennis "the Captain" Starr, a transgender man and JJK's most loyal employee.

Idiosyncratic, strange, offensive, and funny, the JJK Security team presents much like other working-class white families showcased on reality TV – see *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* – yet evokes subversive, self-reflexive tactics employed in many 90s blue-collar situational comedies – see *Roseanne* and *Married with Children*. cursory research on the Internet reveals that Joan Koplan approached the network and proposed their family and related business pursuits as prime objects for reality television scrutiny. The *New York Magazine*'s Approval Matrix in May 2013 credited the show as being "lowbrow brilliant" though such instances of critical

acclaim are few and far between. At the time of my first viewing, reality shows with transgender characters were exceptions to dominant cis-ruling. At present, *Small Town Security* would be encountered amidst a critical proliferation of other representational possibilities (See: *I am Cait*⁴⁴; *Brave New Girls*⁴⁵; *True Trans*⁴⁶; *I am Jazz*⁴⁷). The first *Small Town Security* episode I watched foregrounded callous interactions about Dennis' ongoing transition, and adhered strictly to understandings and embodiments of gender that were rigid and binary. While I was momentarily enthused by the shows potential, and laughed during every moment of rogue-chihuahua-leg-humping, such modes of normative, regulatory, transitional logic were not inspiring to me that evening. That said, something about the show stuck with me. Upon revisiting the program in 2015, such stickiness, particularly as it related to theorizing trans-ness, took on new potential meaning.

Naomi: For me, *Small Town Security* is a particularly illuminating case study of intimacy and queerness, in part, because of its consistently inconsistent representations. You characterize the interactions you first witnessed around Dennis' transition as being "callous," and I can certainly see why; the conversations among characters about pronoun usage, embodiment, hormones, surgeries, and the realm of dating and sex

⁴⁴ *I am Cait* first aired in July 2015, on E! and focuses on Caitlyn Jenner's newly public transition. Of particular significance is the cast of trans women who surround Jenner throughout the filming, offering necessary contrast and critique of her privileged and somewhat oblivious life. At the time of this writing, *I am Cait* is in its second season.

⁴⁵ *Brave New Girls* is a Canadian reality television show which aired on E! in 2014, which focuses on Jenna Talackova, a trans woman who notably emerged in pop culture on account of her participation in the Miss Universe competition. Link to view: http://www.eonline.com/ca/shows/brave_new_girls

⁴⁶ *True Trans* with Laura Jane Grace is a reality-based web-series, directed and produced by AOL.com in 2014. More attention is paid to *True Trans* in the chapter that follows on Community. Link to view: <http://on.aol.ca/shows/true-trans-shw518250660>

⁴⁷ *I am Jazz* is a reality television show that follows transgender teen Jazz Jennings, produced by TLC in 2015. Link to view: <http://www.tlc.com/tv-shows/i-am-jazz/>

swing between supportively playful, earnestly ignorant, and downright rude. The primary narrative surrounding Dennis is uncritically binary-heavy while heterosexuality remains firmly planted at the centre of all JJK interactions. The thing that's most queer about Dennis' storyline to me, though, lies not in his trans-ness at all, but rather in his love for Joan.

When you and I first watched *Small Town Security* together, the complex and confusing web of intimate relationships presented by JJK's core security team seemed almost too good to be true. The interspecies, intergenerational team of JJK moves through several iterations over the course of the show's three seasons, which certainly appeals to my interest in non-linear, non-normative structures of intimacy and kinship. It takes a while to sort it all out – are the core staff blood-relatives? (No.) Are they friends? (Yes-ish.) Employees? (Yup.) Lovers? (...?) It seems that every time things stabilize, a new piece of information crops up to disrupt the assumed relational narrative.

Chase: You are right. For every offense, there appears to be a quick and charming salve, delivered with wit and surprising vulnerability. Dennis' language and opinions about his gender remain his to make and relate, and I am not interested and/or invested in critiquing his process and/or his desires here. That said, I do find myself making many an opinion about the treatment of him by others.

Naomi: It is important to think about the ways the treatment of Dennis changes over time. Though the central characters of *Small Town Security* introduce themselves as being “like a family,” they regularly blur the lines between familial, romantic, and lustful feelings: Joan holds the eye – and the heart – of Dennis, who believes they have been married in several past lives and are destined to be together always; Irwin reluctantly accepts the nonsexual, though deeply intimate and time consuming, relationship between Dennis and his wife because it’s good for the company; Joan is in love with Brian, who proposes to his girlfriend in season two and breaks Joan’s heart a little bit; and Lambchop, the feisty and elderly company chihuahua, holds the attention of the entire team with her “terrible attitude” and declining health.

Alongside his military training, back-to-the-land survivalist mentality, and having moved his ex-partner and three children into rural America in preparation for Y2K disasters that never materialized, it seems to me that Dennis is a very queer character indeed. But not because of his trans identity. Even though he’s undeniably ‘odd’, Dennis is presented as being no stranger than the rest of the bunch. In resistance to pervasive representations of transgender people as spectacle, as monstrous, as deceptive, or as unstable (Clare 2001; Bettcher 2007), Dennis is consistently summarized as being the most dedicated and reliable of employees, and as being the operational backbone of the company. I wonder what kind of representational shift this narrative accomplishes, partially normalizing Dennis’ trans-ness and partially embedding it in a ‘one weirdo among many’ type of worldview. Is this a departure

from typical representations of trans in pop culture, or do you understand it to be reinforcing a different kind of standardized narrative?

Chase: I think it is more complicated than that, though your musings open up interesting connections to trans representation in moving-image theory. Published in 2005, Jack Halberstam's *In A Queer Time and Place* articulates three 'treatments of transgenderism' in film, a few of which might be relevant to our thinking. 'Doubling' refers to the presence of more than one trans subjectivity in the film, thus destabilizing our ability to read trans as singular and/or in isolation.⁴⁸ Understanding that trans is therefore multiple and varied, trans has the potential to become the new representative normativity. It strikes me that we can think about doubling as it relates to your proposed collection of personality 'oddities' in *Small Town Security*. As you state, and I agree, a new anti-normal is established and maintained, with trans never being framed as the central and/or only relational unconventionality.

Another treatment of trans proposed by Halberstam is 'the rewind,' wherein the trans character is presented as cisgender until they are revealed and/or outed part way through the story, thus causing audiences to rewind their experiences and expectations of the person to the beginning of the film. The rewind is of great interest to me as it relates to Dennis' disclosure of his gender identity. Often, the viewer's gaze is stitched to that of another character in a film, thus we experience the trans person, and their related reveal, only in time as they do. In *Small Town Security*

⁴⁸ Further critical attention is paid to doubling in the following chapter on Community.

however, Dennis discloses his past directly to the camera, and therefore to us, at the beginning of the series. We experience the ‘treatment’ of his transgenderism by others with him as opposed to in spite of him, and often from his perspective.

Naomi: I wonder though, can we even consider this show to be a ‘treatment of trans’ in the way you’re proposing? It is, of course, insofar as it contains a trans character that talks the audience through aspects of his transition, but Dennis’ storyline also raises a much broader spectrum of questions. The complex weaving of queer intimacies, bodies, and relational structures in *Small Town Security* positions Dennis as transitioning alongside other characters, presenting transitional foils without making the queerness of his body central to the plot.

Halberstam’s summary of ‘the rewind’, I think, extends beyond trans representations in *Small Town Security* as well. We might think about how the show creatively engages the ‘reveal’, as a subversion of traditional trans related film theory, to think through representations of disability and chronic illness. Absent from Joan’s initial character profile in the pilot, her Parkinson’s disease is revealed only later as a point of relevance. Her health and limited mobility are evident from the start, particularly through the ways in which she directs JJK employees to make her lunch and take Lambchop outside while she remains seated in her favourite chair near the door, but her diagnosis is not immediately made explicit. Instead, Joan is presented as being abrasive and needy, while other characters accommodate her demands. Then,

through a process of ‘rewinding’, the audience is given more information in order to understand some of Joan’s reliance through a different lens.

The treatment of Joan’s disability throughout the show is quite unembellished, and instead of focusing on detailed explanations of illness for the sake of the audience, *Small Town Security* takes it up only so far as it impacts Joan and the day-to-day goings-on at JJK. In this sense, it resists many of the familiar representations of illness and disability on screen: Joan sidesteps the trope of disability producing asexuality (Erickson 2007; McRuer 2010) in vocally and repeatedly speaking about sex, desire, and masturbation. She doesn’t fall under the archetype of a Supercrip⁴⁹, either, as she isn’t seen as triumphantly overcoming her limited mobility simply by living her life (Clare 2001). Finally, though she is experienced as undeniably difficult by those around her, Joan’s illness is merely one factor that is integrated into her brash and crass entirety. It strikes me that *Small Town Security* does not assume the audience to be ignorant or outside of Parkinson’s or other forms of illness as many trans-rewinds do about trans-ness – or perhaps it just doesn’t care.

Chase: Such a lack of care might be available on account of the lack of narrative ‘trick’ in the presentation of Dennis and his identity; there is no secret, therefore there is no reveal. That said, various overlapping connections can be made between the show’s treatment of trans and the show’s treatment of masculinity. In the episode following

⁴⁹ “Supercrip” is sourced from critical disability studies scholarship, and can be defined as someone who is seen to be brave/inspiring/noteworthy despite their disability. Often a Supercrip is lauded for their achievements *in spite of* their physical or mental limitations. Eli Clare notes, “The dominant story about disability should be about ableism, not the inspirational supercrip crap, the believe-it-or-not disability story” (Clare, “The Mountain” in *Exile and Pride*, 2015, p. 2).

Dennis' disclosure of his gender history, we are invited to journey with Irwin as he investigates, acquires, and begins to apply topical testosterone to his body with the hopes of increasing his energy. Dennis' transition-related hormone replacement therapy is doubled by Irwin's new quest to find age-defying supplements and strategies. The synergistic relationship between the two men extends further as we learn that Dennis is 43 years old, the exact number of years that Joan and Irwin have been married, making the generational exchange around love and care for Joan that much more pronounced.

There is an abundance of writing in queer affect studies on family structures, queer kinship, and gendered/classed/racialized intimacies (Berlant 2000; Chen 2012; Eng 2008; Puar 2007). I wonder how we might think through *Small Town Security* together as it relates to structures of care formed outside of (although also somewhat within) normative constructions of work and family. I recently revisited Angela Davis and Toni Morrison's conversation on friendship and creativity facilitated by Dan White at the University of Santa Cruz in October 2014. Together, the authors reflect on their own career trajectories, their influence on each other, and the power of writing as profound mode of connectivity. It strikes me that longevity becomes a key determining factor in the maintenance of these connections. As Joan's health declines, *Small Town Security* asks new questions about relational sustainability and community, alternative-queer- family-like-structures, and foregrounds a complicated blurring between employment and familial boundaries in the future. I'm reminded of

Lauren Berlant's assertion that intimacy "poses a question of scale that links the instability of individual lives to the trajectories of the collective" (2000, 3).

Naomi: Questions of scale and sustainability are interesting in the context of family-like structures. They require we ask questions like who is counted in the collective, what forms of intimacy are sustainable, and to whom? The JJK Security team continues to function together in their supposed dysfunction. Joan's grumpy demeanour exists alongside a deep love for her employees/friends/family – a combination that might be likened to queer crankiness, ugly feelings (Ngai 2004), depression (Cvetkovich 2012), hopelessness (Duggan and Muñoz 2009), unhappiness (Ahmed 2010; Litvak 2011; Love 2009), and wilfulness as resistance (Ahmed 2014) summarized by a growing canon of queer theorists. *Small Town Security* presents failure as integrated and essential to the growing fabric of relationality, and does not position shortcomings in opposition to connectivity.

Chase: Writing in 1981, R. de Ceccaty, J. Danet, and J. Le Bitoux conducted an interview with Michel Foucault called "Friendship as a Way of Life," wherein he discusses various ways in which one might "use one's sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships" (135). Speaking about homosexual love, Foucault observes that men must "face each other without terms or convenient words, with nothing to assure them about the meaning of the movement that carries them toward each other. They have to invent, from A to Z, a relationship that is still formless"

(136). Such formlessness and relational potentiality remains a connective and necessary thread throughout *Small Town Security*.

In creating new language and constructing new modes of encountering, Foucault reminds us that it is not necessarily sex that people find so dangerous and threatening, but rather the expansiveness of intimate possibilities offered by connection (136). In *Small Town Security*, we are presented with relationships that transcend age, status, and ceremony. To borrow from Foucault, *Small Town Security*'s 'way of life' is one that is not reliant upon institutionalization or familial structuring, but rather re-invents itself on account of desire and necessity.

Naomi: What was it that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick said?

Chase: "Kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic" (Sedgwick 1993).

Naomi: Exactly.

EPILOGUE

While experimental in form, the result of our conversation – which was ultimately structured as a shared viewing experience supplemented by back and forth manuscript drafting via email – is a somewhat traditional textual, and idealistic engagement with the show. It strikes me that we are mining for meaning and contextual connectivity within a cultural object that arguably might be lacking necessary foundations. Additionally, our viewing practice, oriented toward, around, and because of experimental research potentials, avoids conversation with

critical technologies of television production. Distraction and the tendency to be interrupted (Spigel 1992) remain under-theorized in our conversation on account of our strategized, directed, and intentional textual reading. Many questions remain unanswered about reception and audience, and answers are not available due to a lack of statistics and related publishing.⁵⁰

The centering of, and reliance upon, eccentricity, which is predicated on various classed stereotypes specific to a white, working-class version of the American south, remains central to our future thinking. In what capacities are the characters within *Small Town Security* mobilizing their own relationship to stereotypes in service of projected and/or promised commodified returns? How might the transition narrative of Dennis Starr be read simultaneously as regressive, reductive and individualized if considered again through an additional alternative reading? These insufficiencies motivate me to return to the practice-based research scholarship of Irit Rogoff (2006), who muses: “It seems to me that the urgent questions and the bodies of knowledge I have at my disposal do not tally and produce a route by which issues, arguments and modes of operating, merge seamlessly. And so it would seem that the task of the academy, of education, is not to affect this seamless merger but to understand this productive disjuncture and its creative possibilities” (13).

⁵⁰ The majority of Internet related engagement with *Small Town Security* appears to be motivated by the network to increase audience. The occasional interview (Dennis Starr in *The Advocate*, for example) provides superficial, and slightly redundant content already reflected by and in the show’s storytelling.

CHAPTER THREE: COMMUNITY (DIS)COMFORT

The transgender film confronts powerfully the way that transgenderism is constituted as a paradox made up in equal parts of visibility and temporality: whenever the transgender character is seen to be transgendered then he/she is both failing to pass and threatening to expose a rapture between the distinct temporal registers of past, present and future.

– Jack Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place*, 2005, 77

The recent proliferation of transgender rights and figures in popular media has resulted in unprecedented attention on gender non-conforming communities in moving-image media.

Writing on the tails of Caitlyn Jenner’s long awaited coming out⁵¹ on the cover of *Vanity Fair*, trans-scholar Eric Plemons asks: “What does ‘transgender’ look like in America today? And, perhaps more pointedly, of what broader contemporary American realities is the crushing focus on Caitlyn Jenner an example?”⁵²

This chapter focuses on representations of community within trans and gender non-conforming populations, tracking the emergence

of documentary feature portraits in the early 2000s – paying specific attention to *Southern*

Comfort (2001) and *The Aggressives* (2005) – through the ascendance of responsive digital

episodic storytelling projects authored by trans directors such as *Her Story* and *The Hawker* on



⁵¹ At the conclusion of his catalogue essay for *Transgender Hirstory in 99 Objects: Legends & Mythologies*, Chris Vargas posits, “if tabloid magazine speculation is correct about everyone’s favorite Kardashian-adjacent Olympian, we are about to experience the Trans-Jenner Tipping Point” (5).

⁵² See Eric Plemons writing for *The Huffington Post*: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/american-anthropological-association/the-problem-with-transgen_b_7622294.html

YouTube. Next, I integrate a spotlight feature on the work of trans director Sam Feder, critically interrogating their two feature length works: *Boy I Am* (2005) and *Kate Bornstein is a Queer and Pleasant Danger* (2014), both of which address historically contentious culture wars within the trans community. The chapter concludes by proposing that the festival-circulated documentary feature has re-emerged in trans media-making circles as a platform for historical re-imagination. New documentaries *Happy Birthday, Marsha* (2015) and *MAJOR!* (2015) demand that revised and critical attention be paid to significant trans subjects, those often missing from cultural and historical records. While some of these projects are still in post-production at the time of this writing, I ask: what is at stake for trans and gender non-conforming media makers who are looking back at historical representations of trans communities? I join the discussion about mainstream industrial representations – as in from and by industry, network, media conglomerate – with activist and community based filmmaking initiatives in moments of shared aesthetic and/or political agenda.

Written in 2008, Peter Block's *Community: The Structure of Belonging* offers critical insight in the negotiation and ever-shifting meaning of community, as both concept and group movement. For Block, communities are most simply summarized as networks of humans tethered by dialogue and a sense of relatedness. For trans and gender non-conforming people, that sense of relatedness remains grounded in curiosity and connected questions about gender. Writing a chapter about "community" presumes that a stable definition of community exists. Understanding the fractured and often contested definitions of community within trans and gender non-conforming spaces means that I endeavor to think laterally, with, and alongside understandings of community, as portraits of collective people, and not necessarily as groups that declare clear or stable boundaries. This chapter investigates moving-image texts that are thinking

beyond the singular, toward the relational and the group. José Muñoz's *Disidentifications: Queers Of Color And The Performance Of Politics* (1999) traces radical trajectories of queer world-making through the politics of performance, and argues for the transformative capacities of critique through cultural production. Disidentifying, according to Muñoz, is recapitulated as a process of working both within and against dominant social and political ideologies in pursuit of new purpose; such recapitulations and disidentifications provide the connective theoretical and tactical thread through my investigations.

DOCUMENTARY FEATURE as COMMUNITY PORTRAIT

What a curious thing to be so uptight about. Nature delights
in diversity, why don't human beings?
– Lola Cola, *Southern Comfort* (2001)

In the introduction to *In A Queer Time and Place*, Jack Halberstam theorizes the sudden visibility of the transgender body in early 21st century cultural production. Throughout, Halberstam seeks to “expand the archive of visual representations of gender ambiguity” (76) through the examination of film, visual art, print media and drag. By theorizing contemporary representations of trans(itioning) subjects, Halberstam both documents and problematizes their presence in moving-image projects alongside broader understandings of postmodern impermanence, and proposes three distinct ‘treatments of transgenderism’ in film: the rewind, ghosting and doubling. As briefly mentioned in the interstitial which precedes this chapter, the rewind summarizes a strategy wherein the trans character is “properly” gendered when first introduced, and then outed part way through the linear narrative, thus causing audiences to rethink and rewind their understanding and expectations of the character, and therefore the film. The most well theorized example of the rewind is Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992) wherein the trans character Dil is outed during a romantic exchange. According to Halberstam,

the significance of this outing – which forces the spectatorial rewind – is of higher value to the viewer than other forms of plot reversals because it is predicated on the understanding of gender as a fixed essential truth, or as something that is visually ascertainable. Halberstam places the responsibility of the device on film form itself by asserting, “when we ‘see’ the transgender character, then, we are actually seeing cinematic time’s sleight of hand” (78). The second treatment of transgenderism articulated by Halberstam is ghosting, where the transgender character emerges in the narrative after death to haunt their life experiences. Further attention to ghosting is paid in the following chapter on violence, through an examination of moving-image representations of Brandon Teena.

As briefly discussed with Naomi de Szegheo-Lang, doubling is a theory and treatment of identity presentation where a trans(itioning) subject is presented alongside a person of similar or doubled identity in an attempt to remove the “nodal point of normativity” from the narrative (78). Halberstam’s original articulation of doubling represents a shift away from traditional understandings of ‘the double’ defined by the doppelganger, twinning, and Jung’s egoic shadow. As both a theory and applied application, doubling can destabilize the understanding of an identity as singular and distinct by providing multiple perspectives, thus productively expanding the visual and related representative field for trans(itioning) subjects.

Made in 2001, *Southern Comfort* chronicles the life and death of Robert Eads, a transgender man diagnosed with uterine and ovarian cancer. Halberstam contends that through doubling, *Southern Comfort* “refuses the medical gaze that classifies [the transgender subject] as abnormal and the heteronormative gaze that renders [the subject] invisible” (78). Throughout the film, Eads is doubled by a community of trans(itioning) subjects, both through individual relationship and the formation of a collective. Notably, director Kate Davis utilizes *Southern*

Comfort as an opportunity to engage a community of trans(itioning) subjects without parodying their experiences against a cis-standard.⁵³ Robert is not the exception to a normatively gendered narrative rule. One early review of the film explained the content as a variety of “gender permutations and perplexing romances.”⁵⁴ After winning the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance in 2001, *Southern Comfort* received moderate media attention and, as such, thrust trans identities of varying styles momentarily into the film festival mainstream.

Throughout the narrative, Robert is featured alongside his partner Lola who is transitioning from male to female at the time of filming. Robert’s narrative is not one of transition, but rather one of life and death. The “transition narrative” in *Southern Comfort* belongs to Lola, though the focus of the story is never about the physicality of her journey between genders. The presence of Lola’s transition displaces the authority and singularity of Robert’s gender identity as primary object of study, and instead renders transitioning – as both conceptual and embodied articulation – part of the broader narrative



fabric. Robert’s self-understanding, self-presentation and self-summary remain stable throughout the film. By presenting Lola in various stages of ever-changing identification, *Southern Comfort*

⁵³ In the chapter, Halberstam also explores *By Hook or By Crook* (2001) as an example of doubling. The film is a queer buddy pic that stars co-directors Silas Howard and Harry Dodge as protagonists who actively refuse any easy conclusion about their gender non-conforming identities. Silas Howard is now a director on *Transparent*.

⁵⁴ Review published on www.sfgate.com, San Francisco Gate on April 12, 2002.

successfully doubles the experience and articulation of transitioning, and thus troubles the opportunity to make rigid articulations of a singular trans narrative.

In addition to his growing intimate relationship with Lola, Robert is doubled by a group of trans men whom he describes as both friends and family. We are introduced to Maxwell Anderson and his partner Corey, who also self-identify as trans. Audiences are again offered another form and configuration of relationship to reference. Where initially relational assumptions could be made about the heteronormative interactions between Lola and Robert, there now exists a reflected double in the story of Maxwell and Corey. Notably, the opinions of each couple conflict and deflect as they discuss topics such as sex, intimacy and priorities in partnership.

Southern Comfort is about the construction and maintenance of family and community, rather than the exploration of transition(ing) as exceptional, singular, pathological, or even explicit. When transitioning is removed from priority focus, rightful attention can and must be paid to the horrific neglect of Robert's health by the medical industrial complex on account of his identity. Issues of transition remain in focus; however, transition is not the orienting logic of storytelling. If we return again to the media sensationalism perpetually adhered to Caitlyn Jenner – Robert's generational kin – we are reminded of the mainstream's obsession with the exceptional and the specific. Jenner's story validates and perpetuates understandings of linear narrative resolution, a process of transition from one side of the binary to the other that not only has a foreseeable conclusion, but also ends in personal satisfaction. Independent and experimental approaches to trans(itioning) subjects reveal alternative models of storytelling and inform related dis-continuous legacies of representation embedded with community.

An unavoidable tension embedded within any attempt to theorize “a trans community” is the fiction of shared experience *within* the community. For example, experiences of trans women (those transitioning from male to female) often differ greatly from those of trans men (those transitioning from female to male). Intersections of race and class inform systemic oppressions that can restrict access to treatment and transition, as does the desire to, and/or potential of passing. Made in 2008, Jules Rosskam’s *Against a Trans Narrative* is an independent, experimental, festival-released, and lecture-supported feature length film, which presents various aesthetic and performative modes of trans narrative destabilization to animate these debates. The process-based experimental documentary proposes the following questions: What does it mean to be trans? Is there an idealized perception of trans masculine identity? And how might we

account for the diversity of trans experience in our building and negotiation of identity and community?

Rosskam provides shape-shifting answers to the above questions in the form of



small group discussions, dramatic reenactments, spoken word performances and fake audition sequences. The variety of forms within the film mirror the myriad of contesting opinions about gender, transgender and gender politics present throughout. Rosskam’s subjects vary in age, class, race, ethnicity and gender identity and are always presented in conversation, rarely, if ever, in isolation.

Roskam's conscientious crosscutting between different physical rooms – also representing disparate generational worlds – of discussion creates a container for community discontent. The table tennis match between conversations productively sutures lesbian identified women⁵⁵ debating 1970s feminism and the female-masculinity of bulldaggers,⁵⁶ with contemporary young queer radical twenty-somethings debating the relevance of a(ny) feminist identity.⁵⁷ When community debates might otherwise be framed as easily in opposition, Roskam creates a contested and unsuspecting alliance between the communities and their conversations.

Many performative strategies mobilized in Roskam's film align with Halberstam's alternative narrative model of doubling. In response to a growing articulation of a mono-trans-identity – one that is arguably to be agreed upon and experienced similarly by many – a discussant proclaims, “it is preventing people from sitting at the same table together because the stakes are too high.” What does it mean to come of age believing that there is a “right kind” of trans person? And what is at stake in the inevitable failure of a process that strives for such impossible agreement? Proving again that identity politics often exclude and define rather than include and invite, Roskam's work seeks to dismantle the propagation of a primary trans identity in favour of a more complicated and varied articulation, even as such propagation must contend with the re-regulation of bodies and identities.⁵⁸ The reliance upon a clear, linear trans narrative in traditional documentary film echoes the proposed stability of a narrative of transition demanded by mainstream media.

⁵⁵ One participant notes that moves to authenticity occur when groups feel under assault.

⁵⁶ Bulldagger is both derogatory and reclamatory slang for butch lesbian identity. For incisive theory that locates bulldagger in historical, racialized, lesbian contexts, see Cathy Cohen's “Bulldaggers, Punks and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *GLQ*, Vol 3. 1997. P 437-465

⁵⁷ One participant makes the distinction between “working on behalf of the rights of women” and “a feminist analysis of structures of power.”

⁵⁸ See “Mutilating Gender” (2006) by Dean Spade

To be recognized in mass culture, one must be legible, and such legibility often requires compromise and erasure of differences within communities and people. Jose Muñoz reminds us that disidentification “is a response to state and global power apparatuses that employ systems of racial, sexual, and national subjugation” (161). According to Muñoz, disidentification becomes a responsive strategy of management and negotiation against trauma and violence. A vital example of disidentification within traditional documentary form is Daniel Peddle’s 2005 documentary *The Aggressives*, an intimate portrait of six self-identified “aggressives:” female born, masculine presenting, binary-breaking people of color in the USA.

The strength of Peddle’s documentary lies not in its formal styling, but rather in the pragmatic treatment of identifications that rarely resemble legible categories of identification in public spheres. Marquise, the only person who begins testosterone in the film, is the



only subject Peddle is unable to connect with at the end of the documentary. Such lack of transition related resolution – is Marquise no longer identifying as an aggressive? Can one be an aggressive when investing into culturally legible forms of normative masculinity? – renders any easy conclusion or overlap between aggressives and trans masculinity unattainable. Muñoz describes disidentification as a term that “is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere,” one that “continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm

of normative citizenship” (4). While alone, or as part of a known collective of similarly identifying people, aggressives knowingly fracture from popular identity narratives that would place female-born bodies into categories of either “lesbian” or “trans(itioning)” subject.

Muñoz acknowledges that disidentification is “not always an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects,” emphasizing that “at times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct; on other occasions, queers of color and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere” (5). As a survival strategy deployed both within and outside of the public sphere, disidentification has limitations. The negotiation and understanding of masculinity by aggressives featured in Peddle’s work is varied and unequal. Muñoz contends, “politicized agents must have the ability to adapt and shift as quickly as power does within discourse” (19). No single strategy will always work. For aggressives, this politicized adaptation often reveals attachments to dominant shifting discourses of masculinity as a means of survival. Whether it is RJai’s chivalry and sweet charm, or Octavia’s resentful navigation of time spent in prison as masculine-identifying, female-bodied person, masculinity remains the organizing logic of aggressive resistance.

Judith Butler claims “oppression works through the production of a domain of unthinkability and unnameability” (1991, 20). When certain bodies or experiences are rendered unnameable and unthinkable, they are made unintelligible, and are therefore excluded in and by the social imaginary. For aggressives, disidentification becomes the manner by which they can be accounted for and empowered beyond the limitations of available social and political gendered machinery. Formally, Peddle’s film follows a predictable path, cross cutting between various talking head interview sequences, and observational, verité portraits. The film follows each subject in their life, through jobs, relationships, family and personal struggles. Subjects are

most often followed separately, while it remains understood that Peddle is creating a portrait of a collective. As witnessed in *Southern Comfort*, representation of multiples becomes the most powerful tool of filmic representation in *The Aggressives*, rendering subjects distinct but also grouped, and in control of their counter-narrative-construction.⁵⁹

TRANS AUTHORSHIP and NEW NARRATIVE CONTROL

All of the aforementioned documentary features about trans(itioning) subjects were authored by non-trans identified people. The democratization of technology, and immediacy of the Internet as platform for episodic story telling has inspired an abundance of work authored by, for and about transgender people.

Led by Laura Jane Grace, musician and recently out lead singer of Against Me!, AOL's *True Trans* (2014) chronicles Grace alongside narratives of other trans and gender non-conforming people. Also a project about kinship and company, Grace asserts that: "hearing [the] stories [of others] and then being able to relate myself to [them] is what I need right now." At first glance, *True Trans* feels predictably educational, mainstream and episodic. However, as segments compound, the series proves to be a meditation on shared themes rather than individual people. Time-based, serial productions that defy narrative conclusion emerge alongside longer-format independent productions as formative opposition to mainstream narrative construction of transition(ing) subjects. Here, seriality invites interrupted, potentially distracted viewing, which can be revisited – or not – over time. Such a viewing apparatus – defined in this context as the

⁵⁹ Initially made as an episodic documentary series for the Sundance Channel, and then released as a feature on the film festival circuit, *TransGeneration* is an 8-part series that similarly chronicles the lives of four college students who are transitioning. One might imagine that *The Aggressives* could have been fashioned similarly with different funding. Discussions of hormone therapy, gender reassignment surgery, family, and coming out follow familiar and predictable documentary tropes in *TransGeneration* and *The Aggressives*, and each subject is revealed through various and often contesting intersections of race and class. The episodic nature of *TransGeneration*'s storytelling is one of the earliest, and therefore formative precursors to the proliferation of episodic trans narratives made for release on the Internet.

interaction between the viewer, the technology, and perceived reality – further reinforces the impossibility of consuming *the whole story*, and invites varied perspectives on common themes.

A segment titled “Dysphoria” begins with the story of Grace and ends in a proliferation of additional narratives offered by trans and gender non-conforming people about similar experiences. Halberstam’s doubling thrives again. With Grace as its anchor, *True Trans* sets the stage for a narrative of transition that is not singular, but rather, one that is continually filtered through multiples – other trans and gender non-conforming people – revealing these decisions and reactions to be part of a broader social system. Grace is not alone in her inquiries and personal and political meanderings.

Of particular note is the episode “Transparenting,” wherein Grace discusses her ever- evolving relationship with her 4-year-old daughter and now



estranged ex-wife. *True Trans* becomes a part of a broader conversation in moving image and academic research about the experiences of trans identified parents.⁶⁰ In the episode “Resilience,” Grace and her trans contemporaries engage the viewing public in a conversation about privilege. Not only the privilege of having, and having to give up, being socialized as male, but the privilege of being able to tell stories in public. Our Lady J, the only trans identified

⁶⁰ Montreal based filmmaker Rémy Huberdeau is collaborating with McMaster researcher, and head of the Trans Pulse Ontario research initiative, Jake Pyne. Together, the pair launched *Transforming Family*, a ten-minute documentary made with funding from the LGBT Parenting Network and the Sherbourne Health Center. *Transforming Family* “jumps into an ongoing conversation among trans people about parenting,” and is available on Vimeo. As a follow up, Huberdeau and Pyne are in the process of making *Transgender Parents*, which re-visits some interview subjects from *Transforming Family*, and encounters some subjects anew.

writer on the Emmy-award winning Amazon show *Transparent*, along with Fallon Fox, the first trans identified Mixed Martial Artist, and Jen Richards, writer and creator of *We Happy Trans*, a website highlighting positive stories of transition on the Internet, become Grace's cohort of collaboration and commentary as interview subjects in the series. Soon after the release of *True Trans*, Richards launched her own episodic narrative series about the experiences of trans women on YouTube called *Her Story* (2016), produced by Eve Ensler of *Vagina Monologues* fame.

Online platforms offer shared foundation and visibility for many trans(itioning) communities historically overlooked by mainstream publics. Regularly connecting people in geographically distanced locations, Internet communities allow for instant and sustained contact (Burgess and Green 2013). Published in *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion*, Tobias Raun's "DIY Therapy: Exploring Affective Self-Representations in Trans Video Blogs on YouTube" explores the vlog format as an emotionally therapeutic and affectively connective space for young trans(itioning) people.⁶¹ With the webcam as companion for the confessional, trans people find community through shared access to digital spaces. Adapting traditional consideration of the confession in film theory,⁶² Raun argues "that users complicate our understanding of the confessional modus by using interconnected practices like (self)-disclosure, coming out and testimony as tools in an ongoing self-representation and community building" (166). A growing body of literature about trans(itioning) communities online suggests that – similar to the linear progress transition narratives dominating film – patterns of formulaic, linear,

⁶¹ For more scholarship on impression management and social media, see "Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life." By Danah Boyd in *Macarthur Foundation Series On Digital Learning–Youth, Identity, And Digital Media Volume*. 119-142.

⁶² See Michael Renov's "Video Confessions" in *The Subject of Documentary*, University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

goal oriented, identity exist.⁶³ The construction and awareness of a formulaic trans(itioning) self is relevant to *Her Story*'s making, as communities built through online portals such as YouTube and Tumblr are the show's introductory market. At the time of this writing, *Her Story* has over 9,000 channel subscribers and 550,000 views online.

While fiction, *Her Story* imagines a world for trans women full of complex characters rather than caricatures and stereotypes. "Trans women in the media have long been punchlines, killers, indications of urban grit, pathetic tragedies, and dangerous sirens," show creator Jen Richards remarks in an interview to Out.com. Immediately breaking typecast, *Her Story* focuses on trans women as powerful career driven characters in pursuit of love and friendship across various boundaries of identity and alliance. While the plot is familiar and simple, the execution

is neither. *Her Story* approaches trans femininity from the inside, authored by trans women, directed, produced and promoted by trans women and queer women of colour; the politics of the production intentionally mirror the execution of the project. On her methodology, Richards notes: "A lot of



people in the queer community, because they're queer, see themselves as particularly progressive and therefore are cut off from some of these other issues. But their groups are often entirely white, middle class, college educated and cis. They have an intellectual understanding of a lot of

⁶³ For further reading see Horak in *TSQ*, 2015, and O'Neil in *Queer Youth and Media Cultures*, 2014.

these issues without any direct experience.”⁶⁴ Richards addresses these oversights and lacks through critical engagement with the issues in the series; namely, the identity-politic motivated tensions between lesbian and trans-feminine communities.

Her Story joins a number of online platform projects funded via crowd sourcing campaigns. With just shy of \$38,000 raised, representing 102% of their requested budget, Richards and her collaborators maintain ultimate control over their content, and the ability to now sell the series to networks like Netflix, Amazon and AOL in hopes of securing a contract for new seasons. In an interview with the LA Times, Richards notes, “Right now we're in the Sidney Poitier⁶⁵ phase of trans representation, where the few that we have have to be so unassailable so that we can open doors.” She continues, “but what's next is we need our hot messes, our rebels, our sexpots and drama queens. We need representation across the board.”

One might be hard pressed to summarize any of the characters in *Her Story* as hot messes, however Richards and her collaborator Laura Zak approach stereotypes directly. Richards, playing the role of Violet, remains in an abusive relationship with a former john after getting clean and leaving the street. One might argue that such a story line is a stereotype;⁶⁶ however, a stereotype can also be a truth. *Her Story* presents the familiar storyline, and infuses the narrative with necessary disruption and reframing. Violet’s burgeoning love interest in new friend Allie – played by Zak – offers a platform for new conversation about cross-community issues and intimate relations. Shame and secrecy are replaced by kinship. Similarly, Violet remains in close relationship with her friend and sponsor, Paige, played by trans actress – and founder of Trans

⁶⁴ See Tre'vell Anderson writing for *The LA Times*: <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/showtracker/la-et-st-her-story-jen-richards-laura-zak-transgender-20160117-story.html>

⁶⁵ In 1964, Poitier was the first black actor to win an Academy Award. Richards includes the comment as a way to link historical dialogues about respectability politics: Poitier “wasn’t an angry black man,” he was quiet, deferential, and therefore more palatable to a white majority mainstream.

⁶⁶ See Calpernia Adams: <http://www.calpernia.com/2009/08/transsexual-cliches-and-stereotypes-in-media/>

Tech Social, an organization designed to help trans and gender non-conforming people enter the work force – Angelica Ross. As the only lead character of colour in an otherwise predominantly white cast, Ross applies knowing pressure to racialized stereotypes in contemporary moving-image practices. In a particularly emotional scene, wherein Paige counsels Violet after leaving her partner, Violet remarks that it is unfair that Paige be both her Mo’Nique and her Morgan Freeman. To which Paige responds:

"What??!! Girl, what story do you think you're in? I am @kerrywashington! As #OlivaPope!"

I include the quote formatted as a tweet by Angelica Ross here to point to the cross-platform strategy of *Her Story*'s makers. Soon after this tweet, Kerry Washington, lead actor in the hit ABC series *Scandal* created by Shonda Rhimes, responded to Ross on Twitter, thus creating visible alliances between black women in positions of representative power in ever-shifting prime time publics. For the makers of *Her Story*, publicity becomes a necessary narrative strategy that competes and converses with representations in the mainstream. *Her Story*'s traction in the mainstream is reliant upon its interaction and inner knowledge of trans communities, as it is from within the audience of community that support exists.

Her Story is not alone in its ingenuity or initiative. As YouTube quickly supplants the DIY film-festival as viable platform for new, experimental, and often underfunded non-industrial content, *Her Story* has company in other community authored and community driven works. Created by Emmett Lundberg in 2012, *BROTHERS* is a web series that focuses on the personal lives of a group of trans men living in New York City. However, unlike *Her Story*, *BROTHERS* remains trapped by broadly conceived formulas of transition, insider jokes and stereotypes, and

pays little attention to the politics of whiteness that run rampant through historical representations of trans(itioning) communities.

Trans and gender non-conforming artists of colour continue to make intricate work outside of narrative episodic structuring on the Internet. Available on their websites and via YouTube, experimental animation in *The Hawker* (2012) by Elisha Lim and Coco Riot interrupts physicalized, embodied manifestations of gender-variant subjects and foregrounds contradictory visual markers that trouble any supposed agreement on a trans(itioning) visual public. Working in Claymation and digital drawing, *The Hawker* tells a story of kinship and diaspora, locating Otherness in strangers as method of coming out and coming of age.

Returning to *Disidentifications*, Muñoz reminds us, “sometimes misrecognition can be tactical. Identification itself can also be manipulated and worked in ways that promise narratives of self that surpass the limits prescribed by the dominant culture” (95). It is not a requirement that Lim and Riot represent an accurate face, as the mere hypothetical and/or projected existence of kinship and mirrored self motivates their story-telling strategies about past and present. For the artists, realism cannot account for the complexity of constructing a self in a racist public. Working explicitly and politically within a landscape of trans cultural production which foregrounds projects made by white artists, Lim and Riot approach form as strategy of tactical opposition.

To that end, Elisha Lim’s Claymation portrait series stems from their pen and paper-drawing series *100 Butches*, which illustrates many gender non-conforming subjects of colour and their narrative positions in Lim’s coming-of-age. *100*



*Butches #9 Ruby*⁶⁷ tells a story of Lim's first crush. The use of pedestrian objects – tuna cans, kitchen utensils, paper, houseplants – as mise-en-scène helps create an other-worldly engagement with an otherwise ordinary story told through voice over narration. Lim's strategic aesthetic disruption of the familiar opens new spaces for alternatively gendered exploration and related articulations of desire. For Lim and Riot, drawing and animation become a new method by which new connective, alternative, narrative possibilities can be deployed and re-imagined. Annabelle Honess Roe's book *Animated Documentary* (2013) makes a case for animation as suitable aesthetic strategy within documentary on account of three provisions: that the project is created frame by frame, that is about *the* world, and not *a* world entirely of the maker's imaginary, and that is it exhibited as documentary. Lim's work fits cleanly into this definition. Elaboration on the capacities of animation and documentary is continued through the exploration of Jess Mac's work in the chapter that follows, "Violence: Death, Animation and Reenactment."

SAM FEDER: COMMUNITY PORTRAITS and COMMUNITY CONFLICT

In addition to the definitional and legal wars, there are less obvious forms of sexual political conflict which I call territorial or border wars. The process by which erotic minorities form communities and the forces that seek to inhibit them lead to struggles over the nature and boundaries of sexual zones.

– Gayle Rubin, *Thinking Sex*, 1984

The first sentence of Sam Feder's website describes their practice as one that explores "the power dynamics and politics of media-driven identity."⁶⁸ This section interrogates two of Feder's feature length works, and positions their moving-image inquiries amidst growing debates in, and about, the trans community: the "FTM/Butch Wars," and "the Tranny debates."

⁶⁷ Link to view: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ko-bHR153mE>

⁶⁸ See Sam Feder's artist website: Samfeder.com

Made in 2006, *Boy I Am* presents burgeoning debates between FTM and lesbian communities about masculinity. Scholars, trans people, activists and lesbians – as if those categories are presumed to be exclusive or easily determined – actively debate intersections of women’s rights, reproductive health, hormones, and privilege. A scholar of masculinities now forever positioned on both sides of the debates, Jack Halberstam is situated as expert, while legal strategist and founder of the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, Dean Spade, offers incisive insight regarding the right to self-determination.⁶⁹

Alongside talking head testimony of experts summarizing broader socio-political debates, Feder features three video diary portraits of Nicco, Norrie, and Keegan, all subjects in various stages of transition from female to male. As Feder’s featured participants discuss feelings of gender dysphoria, decisions to surgically modify

their bodies, and management of their relationships and coming out, Halberstam places the debates in historical context. In “Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum,” published by GLQ in 1998, and then again in *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam summarizes rising tensions within groups of butch lesbians about the encroaching masculinities



assumed by some members of the formally aligned and female-identified lesbian community. He notes, “If we study the fault lines between masculine women and transsexual men, we discover that as transsexual men become associated with real and desperate desires for re-embodiment, so

⁶⁹ In the film, Spade pointedly remarks, “If people were really concerned about the well-being of youth, they would worry less about people regretting their hormone choice and worry more about the consequences of denying health care to people in our communities.”

butch women become associated with a playful desire for masculinity and a casual form of gender deviance” (143). Assumptions of male privilege, and the denial of early feminist activism and advocacy for women’s rights become thrust upon the bodies of female-born, now male identifying subjects, by female-identified members of the lesbian community.

Published in the same issue of *GLQ*, Halberstam initiates dialogue with Jacob Hale, a trans man, in “Butch/FTM Border Wars: A Note on Collaboration” to further animate the debates. The dialogic encounter invites necessary critical attention to the linguistic trope of “border wars” and unpacks various political tensions between once tethered communities. Issues of visibility, transitory space, geography, and temporality make up the “border zone” in question for both Halberstam and Hale. Feder’s feature animates these historical contentions through life stories and rigorous theoretical articulations offered concurrently by subjects living in the same contemporary moment. Archival footage of pride parades where speakers welcome trans people into their evolving definitions of community are cross cut with talking head testimonies of lesbian identified speaking subjects doubting the conviction of those in transition. Though at times affective and touching, Feder never strays from the social and political climates in which the personal journeys are situated. In a recent article penned for *The Advocate*, Jen Richards reminds us that “The open secret of trans activists and organizers is that we spend as much time navigating horizontal harassment and internal politics as we do on our proper outward-facing efforts.” Such a continued reality becomes the organizing logic of Feder’s next feature film, *Kate Bornstein is a Queer and Pleasant Danger (KBQPD)*, made in 2014.

Kate Bornstein is a trans-identified performer, playwright and author who launched into the literary mainstream imaginary with the publication of her first book *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us* (1994). Since, Bornstein has published many subsequent books

that detail her life – one that has been lived as a Scientologist, as a parent, and as a self-identified freak – alongside evolving understandings and developments of transgender rights and advocacy in the public sphere. Where once Bornstein’s voice was thought to be singular, she now writes in, to, for, and against a chorus.

Formally, *KBQPD* actively resists the protocols of the traditional biopic, and as a result, delivers a portrait of Bornstein that remains alive and engaged in the politics and pitfalls of the contemporary moment. Feder began production on *KBQPD* in 2010, before Bornstein had been diagnosed with lung cancer and before the certifiably explosive presence of the tranny wars – also referred to as the tranny debates – online in 2014. The mainstream momentum and related visibility of RuPaul’s reality show *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is often credited for sparking the debate between drag and trans(itioning) communities⁷⁰. Whereas RuPaul and his generational contemporaries – like Bornstein and Mx. Justin Vivian Bond – regard tranny as a term of love, community, initiation and endearment, younger generations of trans people – specifically trans women of color – believe the term to be dangerous and derogatory. When asked to account for the conflict, RuPaul responded to the Huffington Post, saying:

My 32-year career speaks for itself. I dance to the beat of a different drummer. I believe that everybody, you can be whatever the hell you wanna be. I ain’t stopping you. But don’t you dare tell me what I can do or say. It’s just words. Yeah, words do hurt... You know what? ... You need to get stronger. You really do, because you know what, if you think, if you’re upset by something I said, you have bigger problems than you think.⁷¹

⁷⁰ I offer the distinction between drag and trans(itioning) communities here as a way to illuminate subject positions within the debates: between performance (drag) and authenticity (transitioning). I do not, however, propose that the distinctions between these categories are fixed, as personal identifications and related relationships between performance and authenticity are ever changing.

⁷¹ See James Nichols writing for *The Huffington Post*: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/22/rupaul-responds-tranny_n_5374897.html

An op-ed titled “About the word Tranny” by Tony-nominated performer Mx. Justin Vivian Bond, published in 2014 by *The Stranger*, warns “Banning Words Is Censorship, and Censorship Is a Conservative Tactic.” In the concise address, Bond offers readers an important reminder about the revival of the word queer – both within academic and in activist arenas – as an example of a word that at one time carried negative and hateful historical import, but which has since been reformed. Bond cautions against the homonormative uptake of LGBT rights: “Long before and even since Stonewall, the gay bourgeoisie has tried to hide the drag, leather, and trans subcultures away from the mainstream media to present a ‘positive’ face in order to gain mainstream acceptance for the heteronormative LGBT people of their own class.”⁷² Kate Bornstein too, responded online,⁷³ and her allegiance to both her opinions and her generation garnered immediate and vitriolic backlash.

Bornstein’s response to the community discontent is made visible – in point form – on her website, and through active dialogue in Feder’s film. While *KBQPD* is based on Bornstein’s memoir of the same name, it does not ask questions of its subject in the same manner. Instead, Feder allows Bornstein’s life circumstances to dictate the narrative. In a filmed interview with Amos Mac and Rocco Kayiatos, editors of the trans-masculine print magazine and online resource *Original Plumbing*,⁷⁴ Bornstein gets a call from her doctor with a cancer diagnosis, and Feder breaks from filming. Prior to the film’s emergence in film festivals worldwide, and prior to the knowledge that Bornstein would later go into remission, an Indiegogo campaign was launched, generating over \$100,000 to aid in Bornstein’s recovery and treatment.

⁷² See Mx. Justin Vivian Bond writing for *The Stranger*: <http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/about-the-word-tranny/Content?oid=19946137>

⁷³ See Kate Bornstein: http://katebornstein.typepad.com/kate_bornsteins_blog/2014/05/tranny-revisited-by-auntie-kate.html

⁷⁴ Link to view: www.originalplumbing.com

Similar to strategies employed by Feder in *Boy I Am*, *KBQPD* invites viewers to spend time in the complexities of shared history, namely through access to a conversation between Bornstein and



formative trans scholar Sandy Stone. Stone is responsible for authoring “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” a critical response to lesbian feminist Janice Raymond’s hateful and transphobic diatribe, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* published in 1979.⁷⁵ Bornstein and Stone find shared affinity discussing the past, while acknowledging present changes within the trans community and projections of possible future. As such, Feder’s film marks an evolution in queer and trans filmmaking which re-addresses historical subjects, and historical moments, through re-staged attention in the contemporary moment.

ENVISIONING COMMUNITY PAST through PRESENT and FUTURE

At the time of this writing, two documentary films are being made by queer and trans video makers about historically significant trans subjects. In 2015, StormMiguel Florez and Annelise Ophelian presented a preview of *MAJOR!* at the San Francisco International LGBT Film Festival, a feature-length documentary about the life and activist work of transgender elder and pioneering civil rights activist Miss Major Griffin-Gracy. *MAJOR!* re-tells narrative histories specific to trans women of color in North America and counters the white-washing and racialized media neglect of various activist inspired queer histories. Griffin-Gracy was at the Stonewall

⁷⁵ While integral to the telling of histories and debates between and within trans and lesbian feminist communities, Janice Raymond was not the only person writing. Feminist allies like Monique Wittig and Jeanne Cordova were thinking and writing intersectionally about similar issues at the same time.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE AESTHETIC ARCHIVE OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE: *Akin* with Hannah Dyer, Ph.D.

But the asking is not idle. It is when you are asking about something that you realize you yourself have survived it, and so you must carry it, or fashion it into a thing that carries itself
– Anne Carson, *Nox*.

PROLOGUE

Hannah Dyer is an Assistant Professor of Childhood Studies at Carleton University. When my film *Akin*⁷⁶ (2012) premiered at Inside Out, Toronto's LGBT Film Festival⁷⁷, Hannah approached me with shared connection to the work that was both personal, and psychoanalytic. *Akin* utilizes poetic documentary (Nichols 2001) form to tell a story about violence and shared family secrets.

In the conversation that ensues, I locate my work alongside the queer experimental documentary filmmaking traditions of Richard Fung's *My Mother's Place* (1990) and Mike Hoolboom's *Mark* (2009), while Hannah introduces the psychoanalytic scholarship of Oren Gozlan (2014) and Cathy Caruth (1996) to make sense of generational transmissions of trauma and aesthetic treatments of history and memory. Together we map disparate disciplinary affinities onto a shared object of study, at once attending to our personal investments whilst collectively challenging the aesthetic boundaries of the work.

CONVERSATION

Hannah: Chase, I want to ask you about your 2012, 9 minute film, *Akin*, which is described as an 'experimental documentary'. I'd like to know more about what its creation and distribution has meant for you. In *Akin*, we are introduced to your mother, and then a broader family genealogy which is contoured by transitions between faith,

⁷⁶ Link to view: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERjrl4vkuGQ>

⁷⁷ *Akin* was awarded the EP Canada/Canada Film Capital Award for Emerging Canadian Artist in June 2012.

gender and generations. A car ride through the suburb in which your childhood was lived, with your mom at the wheel, is meant to elicit a narrative of family secrets about a mother and son's shared history of violence. The camera plays with reflections made in rear view mirrors and a sheet of rain falls down outside, causing opacity between the car's occupants and the physical geography you traverse. Your artist statement, found on your website, reads: "I wonder what it might mean to tell personal stories without claiming personal truths? And furthermore, I wonder what it might mean if the story of me didn't have to inherently disprove and/or de-authenticate the story of you?" This statement captures the ethical dilemma you address in *Akin*: Is it possible to narrate a personal history without impinging on the alterity of the other who shares in an experience? This is a uniquely challenging endeavor when constructing a narrative that involves one's mother, a figure and a phantasy who we are often deeply bound to, as she is most often the first to withstand our omnipotent fantasies of both love and destruction. Expressed in the film is a palpable curiosity about how you can continue to grow-up outside the reach of your parent's shadow, and also, better understand how your subjectivity has been made through identifications with and against both your mother and a disappeared father. You are asking for answers about how history is tied to a mother who resists inquiry into the past, but you seem less concerned about the acquisition of truths and more sure that you are in need of the care of another who can support your explorations of the intrapsychic conflicts that result from sexual violence.

I understand *Akin* to be an expression of your need to live in the aftermath of sexual assault, within the intricacies of intergenerational transmissions of memory, and desire to make transitions between past and present, childhood and adulthood, sex and gender. It is a story about the resiliency necessary for finding hope after sexual assault; what makes it lyrical and elliptical is its efforts to spend time with trauma's intrusion into psychic life, to notice how trauma causes a unique adhesion of past events to present day responses. Even at the film's conclusion, your memories remain stubbornly opaque, and the truth of your family history is just as impervious. Chase, what compelled you to archive this story and to create an audience for it? In what ways does film offer you a new method of theoretical inquiry, and art more generally, provision a space for communing with traumatic experience?



Chase: I always knew that I'd make a film about my mother. Partially because the collision of my transition from female-to-male and her conversion from Christianity to Orthodox Judaism were so similarly timed; and also because there was so much to explore beyond the scope of our two tabloid worthy histories. "I

don't know what I'm doing yet," I said to her amidst a request to go back to our old neighborhood together. "If you wouldn't mind driving, I'm just going to start shooting."

And it was true, partly. I didn't know what I was doing, but I did know what I was thinking. The result of our time together was 3 hours of shakily shot out-the-window-of-a-moving-car footage, and a deafening silence. When I inquired as to whether or not she'd ever return to live in the town again, she responded, "Nope. It's not who I am. I'm not sure who I am, but I'm not this. And it wasn't who I was then, either." Perhaps a follow up question to that statement was required, but I couldn't find it.

During the only occasion that we parked the car that afternoon, she exclaimed, "It's another life. Yes it impacts you, but don't go back to it because it keeps you stuck back there instead of moving forward." And that was it; there was no other conversation.

I have always been inspired by the narratives of emotional and familial becoming offered by queer Canadian experimental filmmakers like Richard Fung and Mike Hoolboom. While both artists traffic in non-fiction, first-person forms, each resists the traps and tropes of sentimental storytelling by hyper-articulating the façade and fallacy of any pursuit of "truth" in documentary film. I knew with certainty that I would not find "the truth" of our family past in my construction of

Akin, but I imagined moving-image to be a suitable aesthetic channel through which to explore potentially unanswerable questions.

Hannah: Perhaps you wanted to know what is left of your mother and father's broken relationship inside of yourself, and wondered how your adulthood is contoured not only by the violence that found you in childhood, but also that found your mother in hers. It seems that by the time you embarked upon the making of *Akin* you had become conscious of some of these things, that the material you wanted to work with was bothering you but had not wholly been metabolized or integrated. You wanted to become more equipped to deal with the residues, affective dissonances, and persisting emotional disruptions caused by an injustice done to you in childhood, much of which was not consciously detectable but nonetheless left mnemonic evidence that could not easily fit into the stories you had previously learned to tell about yourself. Watching this film reminded me that some of the autobiographical details we hold onto are attempts to insulate and protect ourselves from knowing the trauma that lives within and amongst many of us.

Asking your mother to join in the re-telling of your childhood, and then asking a wider audience to do so as viewers of your film, may have been an attempt to loosen control of the narrative, to let the social impinge on your intrapsychic dynamics. Being able to integrate knowledge of a traumatic event involves working with the affective excesses of its imposition, the agitations, phantasies, defences, dreams and phobias it may cause. To me, it felt like you wanted to

recruit these psychic dynamics as tools for your craft. Was it your hope that the car ride would give language to affect not yet named but nonetheless present? What artistic strategies did you draw on to help in the symbolization of difficult experience?

Chase: It is easy to lean into the impulse that allows documentary film to fill-in-the-blanks, and to edit out silence in an effort to keep the audience more comfortable. (As if comfort should ever be the goal of these pursuits...) As my mom and I were driving that day, restless, solitary, silent battles were waged between what was known without speaking and what was being revealed through conversation. During the only occasion wherein we parked the car that afternoon, my mom exclaimed, "It's another life. Yes it impacts you, but don't go back to it because it keeps you stuck back there instead of moving forward." There was no further conversation. Such silence offered me a number of choices, I could narrate atop the visual landscape I was creating or I could construct a series of images that might allow that silence to hang.

Richard Fung's *My Mother's Place* (1990) positions the filmmaker as narrator and facilitator of his mother's diasporic oral-history. Rita, third generation Chinese-Trinidadian, tells her son of their family's many missing pieces, alongside the formation of her raced,



classed and gendered identity under colonialism. Fung gestures to the viewing audience often, reminding us of the film's construction, perhaps going so far as to suggest that we should doubt the truthfulness of his storytelling. Fung's strategy resonates deeply with me.

When first shooting *Akin*, it was a grey, rainy day. I often wonder what the project would have looked like, had sun soaked the streets of my camera-related inquiries. Upon closer look, one might notice the landscape of the film as one that changes from snow to rain, with the temporal fractures of documentary filmmaking allowing me to suture multiple seasons together, from multiple shoot days, to supplement my storytelling. It remains striking to me that such a detail might actually be irrelevant, as those trees and those power lines could be running atop anyone, anywhere.

Hannah: You seem to be seeking a field of reference in a mother whose history is not readily available to either of you, explained as both something she hopes to escape and never, really, was present within. If it did not happen to her as the woman she wants to be known as, where then do we locate subjectivity? Your mother's silence on the subject of the past is not necessarily about a failure of memory, rather, it may have to do with a shattering of the ego after an external event that causes internal suffering. What does seem sure is that at first whisper of an encounter with the force of a violent masculinity, your mother insisted that she and her children must leave. Her children, perhaps, offer her a chance to re-make her own experience of violence- this time, there is a way out. There is a rupture in

the fabric of the children's kinship, but the children seem to know that their mother had an ethical imperative to protect them. Has your mother been able to protect you? Has she helped you to recover memory? Or, do you now better understand why she does not want to return to a difficult past?

Chase: It's interesting to think about the stories we won't tell, or the details we avoid in service of better focus and cleaner narration, even while the center point — the trauma, the rape, the unspeakable past— remains the foundation upon which our storytelling strategies sit. My mom is a master of keeping appearances, a skill even further refined by the protective trappings of Orthodox Judaism. I don't think she would define protection as a process of recovering memory, but rather, as a process of protecting memory from further uninvited scrutiny. It could be argued that we approach the pursuit of resolution antithetically. My mom, believing wholeheartedly that to look back is to inhibit moving forward, and me understanding that looking back might be the only reasonable path to a future available for us to take.

Hannah: To listen to the stories that trauma tells, according to Cathy Caruth (1991), is to attend to the ways that memory fails. It seems that you both knew and did not know what lived in your mother's past; you had a sense of what memories tug at the edges of her contemporary emotional life but wanted more clarity. There are no satisfying answers for the questions posed, but the way they are posited is a gesture towards a new way of relating to a mother who helped plan an escape. There is a large body of literature that suggests that art holds a unique space in

which to symbolize psychic conflict (Georgis 2013; Hagman 2011; Meltzer and Williams 2008). Much of this literature makes reference to Melanie Klein's formulation of reparation (1975), in which she describes the psychic process of coming to terms with the need to integrate love and hate, to find optimism amidst resentment. Has making art offered you a method for reparation after experiencing trauma? Are there pieces of memory that you are beholden to but that also remain enigmatic?

Chase: For me, art making creates critical, tangible objects out of emotional and political ephemera. While *Akin* might have begun as a process of familial excavation between my mom and me, it quickly became a meditation on the impact of masculinities on our sense of selves, survivorship, belonging and related alienation. While we don't talk about specific men per se, the ghosting of masculine force between us hangs heavy, and my access to manhood through transition becomes an awkward and necessary fissure to further investigate. Just as much as we remember, we both struggle with processes of forgetting, rewriting, and blocking, as necessary but flawed strategies of present-day storytelling. I am reminded of Mike Hoolboom's film, *Mark* (2009), a fragmented portrait of his long-time friend and editor Mark Karbusicky who committed suicide in 2007. Hoolboom struggles to make sense of



trauma and loss through interviewing Mark's friends, and layering beautifully synced home video and found footage atop careful narration. The film ultimately surrenders to the insufficiencies of the camera as a method of emotional and personal recovery, admitting failure to the audience by pointing to moments of the enigmatic, the unanswerable, and the slippage of collective and personal memory.

Hannah: As audience to *Akin*, we are invited to share in some of the knowledge and visceral feelings of a violation that occurred in your childhood and thus, you provide us with a beautiful text for thinking about the residue that childhood experience leaves on the adult's psychic environment. We have reflected on how *Akin*'s creation helped you to repair a difficult childhood experience but I am also wondering about what you have learned from its reception. What have audiences taught you, or what have you taught them, about the relationship between your childhood experiences and your status as an adult artist?

Chase: I move in and out of the ability to give my childhood necessary adult attention. *Akin* has afforded me an opportunity to breathe air into an otherwise claustrophobic engagement with a stagnant history; but has also revealed the limits of storytelling as method. Only through the unexpected collision of the unshowable and the unspeakable, did an aesthetic object emerge that might offer new pathways for my mom and me to move beyond the story and into some other, necessary, unrealized affective space.

Hannah: Central to feminist politics has been a struggle against the naturalization of sexual assault and violence against women. In *Akin*, you seem to agree with such

collective, feminist impulses. But, you do not allow us to believe that the story can begin or end with an assumption that gender is so easy a categorical identification. Oren Gozlen explains that gender identity may be “a collage of unconscious phantasies, acted out and defended against at once...What is destroyed through the collapse to a binary is the otherness of gender where one can play with gender as a placeholder for identity” (560). You have described *Akin* as an example of how one might move beyond thinking trans as identity and into an embrace of trans as method of theoretical inquiry. Is this film a contribution to the field of trans-feminist thought? What does it say about gender?

Chase: For me, any feminist response entails a critical and continual thinking through of various intersectional axes of personal and political position. What does it mean to be a white man making this work? How can I attend and remain accountable to the ways in which my work moves in the world on account of these privileges? How can I, as a trans man with passing-privilege, continue to make work about experiences I have internalized as hyper-feminine within myself, all the while understanding that I no longer bear the burden of the feminine in public?

In this way, I see my work aligning in part with the move, cited by Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore in their Introduction to *WSQ*'s issue on “trans-”, to move beyond discussions of “trans-” centered exclusively on gender. They write, “In seeking to promote cutting-edge feminist work that builds on existing transgender-oriented scholarship to articulate new generational and analytical perspectives, we didn't want to perpetuate a minoritizing or ghettoizing

use of ‘transgender’ to delimit and contain the relationship of ‘trans-’ conceptual operations to ‘-gender’ statuses and practices” (11). It is interesting to note that, in such conversations, “gender” is being fractured from its position of primacy; as they state, “we have assembled work we consider to be ‘doubly trans’ in some important sense—work that situates ‘trans-’ in relation to transgender yet moves beyond the narrow politics of gender identity” (15). I like that, doubly trans, my mom and me.

EPILOGUE

At the time of this writing, Hannah and I have presented this paper-as-conversation three times. Both at Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences in Ottawa, ON and at the Conference on the Image at UC Berkeley in 2015, we were positioned on panels with other scholars speaking about shared themes. In 2016, Dina Georgis –Associate Professor, Women and Gender Studies, University of Toronto – joined us for a special presentation. Georgis has a paper forthcoming about *Akin* in Oren Gozlen’s new book about psychoanalytic engagements with transgender identities.

With each public presentation, Hannah and I are challenged by the practice of watching *Akin* in public, and remain aware of the impact of our attempts to mobilize scholarship soon thereafter. We wonder how this hybrid, dialogic structure can attend to the personal and affective impacts of shared moving-image spectatorship, alongside our desire to participate in formalized modes of academic presentation and related information dissemination. Is it possible to remain responsive, or do traditional conference environments require us to foreclose these imaginative possibilities? And how can we attend to the impacts of continued public engagement around violence and shared histories.

CHAPTER 5: VIOLENCE

Death, Animation and Reenactment

The opening and closing scenes in this program were recreations, based on eye-witness accounts.

- Opening credit text
from *Middle Sexes: Redefining He and She* (2005)

Middle Sexes: Redefining He and She (2005) begins in darkness. Headlights of a car illuminate a forest path, ominous music underscores the sound of car tires on gravel, and the narrator – in this case, Gore Vidal – begins to tell you a story. A(nother) trans person has been murdered because of their identity, and

we are being given a(nother) cinematic opportunity to ask why. Except you've heard this story before, and you already know the answer. In North America, transgender people are often murdered when they are found out to be transgender (Lee and Kwan 2014).



In *Middle Sexes*, we learn about

Gwen Araujo, murdered at 17 in California by four men, two of whom had been her intimate partners. Attorneys argued for “temporary insanity,” and mobilized the “trans panic” defense – an extension of the “gay panic” defense – to justify the passionate reaction of her killers. Judith Butler warns “If certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense” (2004, viii). This chapter investigates the treatment of violence against trans(itioning) people in moving-image through analysis of documentary features, PBS broadcast programming,

and collaborative experimental animation on the Internet.

Reporting in August 2015, *The New York Times* confirmed that increased visibility has not resulted in decreased rates of violence experienced by transgender people (Rogers 2015).

Pervasive economic and social discrimination, lack of access to educational and occupational resources, and isolation from peers and family continue to impact and devastate the most marginal members of the transgender community. In conversation with TIME Magazine, Mason Davis – long-time trans advocate and former Executive Director of the Transgender Law Center – notes, “Right now we’re experiencing a Dickensian time, where it’s the best of times and it’s the worst of times at once.”⁷⁸ He continues, “we’re seeing a marked increase in the public awareness about transgender people and really incredible progress for trans rights, especially from a legal perspective. At the same time, we still represent and are part of a community that experiences incredibly high rates of unemployment, poverty and violence.”

Statistics about violence against transgender and gender non-confirming people abound (Lombardi and Wilchins 2002; Stotzer 2009; Trans PULSE 2015), and within those statistics, rates of violence against transgender women of colour remain disproportionately higher. According to a Trans PULSE Project⁷⁹ survey posted online in 2015, 22–43% of transgender people in Ontario alone report having attempted suicide, often the direct result of feared and experienced violence elsewhere. Even when considering this excess of data, numbers reported about violence against trans people remain grossly inaccurate due to lack of reporting, and mischaracterization of data in medical and prison records. For example, if a person’s legal documentation has not been changed to reflect their gender identity of choice – often an issue of class and access for many transgender people – violence reported by hospitals and service

⁷⁸ Opening line of *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) by Charles Dickens

⁷⁹ “The Trans PULSE Project is a community-based research (CBR) project that is investigating the impact of social exclusion and discrimination on the health of trans people in Ontario, Canada.” transpulseproject.ca

providers will reflect the gender assigned at birth, thus obscuring statistics about transgender people.⁸⁰

Historically, violence has been both the thematic device and lived reality employed by filmmakers to justify the presence of trans(itioning) subjects in moving-image media. Most recognizably, the creative trajectories linked to – and sourced from – the 1993 murder of Brandon Teena propelled the death of a trans(itioning) subject into Oscar winning *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), and subsequently positioned white, American, (trans)masculinities at the center of gendered-violence commentary and debates. Much has been written about Brandon Teena (Sloop 2000; Halberstam 2001), and the treatment of his murder in moving-image (Levine 1999; Swan 2001; Esposito 2003). Rather than re-summarize that scholarship here, this chapter proposes that the heightened multi-media attention to Teena's story has dramatically impacted subsequent representations of violence against trans(itioning) people.

In the decade that followed Teena's murder, documentary treatments of violence against trans(itioning) subjects such as *Middle Sexes: Redefining He and She* (2005), *Two Spirits: Sexuality, Gender, and the Murder of Fred Martinez* (2009), and *Cruel and Unusual* (2006) emerged to extend representational publics often overlooked by mainstream representations that reproduce white privilege. This chapter engages the scholarship of Bill Nichols on reenactment to explore its frequent use as story telling device, and Augustine Park's writing on settler colonialism to suggest ways in which trans and indigenous subjects are often aligned and extinguished. I follow with discussion of Rosa Von Praunheim's *I Am My Own Woman* (1992), an early example of collaborative reenactment as strategy of both representational refusal and political resistance. Finally, I suggest that Jess Mac's on-going animated digital story-telling

⁸⁰ Similar processes of mischaracterization and related data exclusions are experienced when reporting rates of HIV, for example, some HIV+ trans women are documented as 'men who have sex with men'.

project, *Where We Were Not* (2011), offers formal exceptions to many representational conventions, as it foregrounds collaboration with trans(itioning) subjects to challenge colonial modes of representation and conventional articulations of authority. Annabelle Honess Roe's scholarship on animated documentary provides theoretical footholds for the exploration and construction of these new stories, and extends aesthetic capacities for reenactment when considering violence against trans(itioning) people.

BRANDON TEENA

The second chapter of Jack Halberstam's *In A Queer Time and Place* summarizes theoretical, social, political and emotional impacts of the 1993 murder of Brandon Teena.⁸¹ Throughout, Halberstam contends that the overabundance of media attention paid to the murder positions Teena as not



just a person, but also a representative example of intersectional discourses and related meaning making about transgender people in the cultural imaginary.

To begin a series of linked debates, Halberstam introduces *The Brandon Teena Story*, directed by Susan Muska and Gréta Ólafsdóttir.⁸² Released in 1998, the film documents Teena's fatal downfall through interviews with those close to him at the time of his murder and audio

⁸¹ Halberstam also discusses how Teena's story amplified identity debates about the ownership of his experiences by lesbian and trans communities.

⁸² Both schooled in the US, the pair have since continued to make documentary portraits about the LGBT community: the latest, *Edie & Thea: A Very Long Engagement* (2009) is available on Netflix.

recordings of his encounters with police. The film familiarizes viewers with the landscapes of rural Nebraska, and positions the camera, and therefore the makers, as outsiders looking in upon a presumably unfamiliar pastoral environment. Brandon is summarized as being trapped by both his geographic surroundings and the gender that he was assigned at birth, ultimately unable to “get out” of his intersecting realities and related circumstances. Within the world of the documentary, we too become trapped, by overlapping articulations of rural, white, poor masculinities and their potentially devastating impacts.

Brandon Teena was killed with two of his friends by two young, poor, white men. Halberstam is quick to pay attention to the details, writing “Brandon’s story, coupled as it is with the death of African American Philip DeVine, reminds us of the interchangeability of the queer and the racially other in the white American racist imagination” (35). The generalized media neglect of Brandon’s friend – a black disabled person – points to underexplored intersections of homophobia and racism, and the privileging and sensationalized attention granted to Teena. Similar neglects exist in Kimberley Peirce’s fictional re-imagining of the story in *Boys Don’t Cry*. Halberstam explains “by omitting DeVine’s story from *Boys Don’t Cry*, Peirce contributes to the detachment of transgender narratives from narratives about race” (2001, 33). Writing about the murders of black children in 1979, James Baldwin remarks upon the social and political climates that continue to inform states of violence against marginalized communities:

The cowardice of this time and place – this era – is nowhere more clearly revealed than in the perpetual attempt to make the public and social disaster the result, or the issue, of a single demented creature, or, perhaps half a dozen such creatures, who have, quite incomprehensibly, gone off their rockers and must be murdered and locked up (72).⁸³

Baldwin’s writing illuminates the uneven telling of history related to violence against marginalized subjects. The murder of Brandon Teena is remembered as a story about transphobia

⁸³ From *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* by James Baldwin, as quoted in *In A Queer Time and Place*, p 45

and hate at the hands of singular killers, rather than a far more intricate example of racism and homophobia firmly woven through the fabric of American culture. Moving-image projects made about murdered trans(itioning) subjects in the decade that followed *The Brandon Teena Story* and *Boys Don't Cry* attempt to address these intersecting, and often neglected, racialized realities.

F.C. MARTINEZ

Made in 2005, *Two-Spirits: Sexuality, Gender, and the Murder of Fred Martinez* explores intersections of gender non-conformity and violence in Navajo communities. Murdered at 16, Fred Martinez, known as F.C. to family and friends, openly identified as Two-Spirit, or Nadleeh(e),⁸⁴ one who identifies as both – or with both – male and female. The film is anchored by an interview with activist Cathy Renna, a researcher specializing in hate crimes. Renna explains that the hallmark of hate crimes is “over-kill” – a phrase that describes inordinate amounts of violence and force. Like Gwen Araujo and Brandon Teena, F.C. was victim of brutal over-kill, and left to rot near sewer pods south of Cortez, Colorado.



Two-Spirits originally aired on PBS, and has since been removed from cost-free viewing; however companion videos remain online as pedagogical tools, to provide further narrative and

⁸⁴ A useful summary of terms under the heading ‘Navajo Cultural Constructions of Gender and Sexuality; can be found on a Wordpress blog made for the Department of Gender Studies, Indian University Bloomington. <https://transgenderglobe.wordpress.com/2010/12/17/navajo-cultural-constructions-of-gender-and-sexuality/>

contextual framing. The first segment features Pauline Mitchell, F.C.'s mother, speaking about the loss of her son. Her testimony is a kindred digital spirit to that of Sylvia Guerrero, speaking about her daughter Gwen, in *Middle Sexes*. Both mothers identify hate as the ultimate killer, and offer insight into the management and realization of their children's gender identities.

The second companion video features author and activist Mark Thompson speaking about the significance of youth mentorship. Through sharing his own formative encounters with queer adults as a young person, Thompson proposes that the presence of elders and their related generational insights are necessary tools for the healthy and supported development of gender-variant young people. Thompson's call to elders evokes Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart's writing on the historical trauma response among indigenous people (2011). Historical trauma response is defined as a constellation of characteristics and emotional responses impacting indigenous communities as a result of continued trauma and cultural wounding under colonialism, often passed down through generations. Brave Heart argues that historical trauma responses must be considered when approaching issues of abuse, fear, and violence in indigenous communities.

The third companion video to *Two-Spirits* offers a thoughtful, introductory, exploration of gender variance in native traditions by Two-Spirit organizer Richard LaFortune. Two-Spirit – much like transgender – is often conjured as an umbrella term by indigenous communities in North America to broadly signify gender variance. Deviations in use and definition expand within First Nations communities, alongside articulations of third and fourth genders (Hill 1935; Williams 1992; Jacobs 1997; Nanda 2000). However, in contrast to some formulations of transgender, Two-Spirit identities more frequently embrace and acknowledge a hybrid, mutable relation to masculinity and femininity, rather than a binary opposition.

Much like the representational strategies employed by makers of *Middle Sexes*, *Two Spirits* relies on reenactment of violence as aesthetic strategy. Reenactment of Gwen Araujo's murder is visually manifest through a night-time forest scene where her killers are seen breaking ground to bury her body, while the murder of F.C. Martinez is articulated as a quick shot-reverse-shot of a fatal strike to the head with a bloody rock.

REENACTMENT

Reenactments are clearly *a* view rather than *the* view from which the past yields up its truth. Reenactments produce an iterability for that which belongs to the singularity of historical occurrence. They reconcile this apparent contradiction by acknowledging the adoption of a distinct perspective, point of view, or voice. Such perspectives can proliferate indefinitely, but each of them can also intensify an awareness of the separation between the lost object and its reenactment.
– Nichols 2008, 80

Bill Nichols' "Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject" and Jonathan Kahana's dossier "What Now? Presenting Reenactment" provide theoretical guides for my explorations into the stakes of reenactment when considering violence and trans(itioning) people. My initial interest in reenactment was sparked when listening to a presentation by Wendy Gay Pearson at the Visible Evidence 2015 Conference in Toronto. There, Pearson challenged the pedagogical value of using reenactment when teaching queer and gender non-conforming students about shared violent histories; she asked: does teaching moving-image projects that feature brutal reenactment in fact do more harm than good to viewing publics when addressing these issues?

Controversies surrounding the salience and ethics of reenactment trace back to Robert J. Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), and extend through the contemporary moment with extraordinarily heated discussions of Oscar winning *The Act of Killing* (2012). As a genre

historically situated alongside discourses of “truth,” reenactment calls attention to the temporal ruptures and fictional potentials offered by documentary.



Both *Middle Sexes* and *Two-Spirits* offer visually expository summaries of the murders, representing the killings through dramatized, close-up, suggestive images. Bill Nichols proposes “The reenacted event introduces a fantasmatic⁸⁵ element that an initial representation of the same event lacks. Put simply, history does not repeat itself, except in mediated transformations such as memory, representation, reenactment, fantasy — categories that coil around each other in complex patterns” (73). According to Nichols, cinematic reenactments can be clustered into five categories: 1) realist dramatization – a contentious form as it successfully blurs lines between fiction and reality – made famous in crime dramas, 2) typifications, a “sense of typifying past patterns, rituals, and routines,” with no true reference to the historical occurrence, usually understood as pre-contact activity staged for the camera, 3) Brechtian distantiation – to defamiliarize or make strange, 4) stylization, and 5) parody and irony. He continues:

Although it is possible, especially with realist dramatizations and typifications, to think that reenactments contribute historical evidence, what they more commonly contribute is persuasiveness. For documentaries belonging to the rhetorical tradition, reenactments intensify the degree to which a given argument or perspective appears compelling, contributing to the

⁸⁵ For the viewer, the fantasy of the murdered trans person is that they are murdered by people “not like me.” Rarely are we given opportunity to sit with the murderers. A notable exception to this statement is the presence of John Lotter and Tom Nissen in *The Brandon Teena Story*, and the availability of on-camera interviews on YouTube.

work's emotional appeal, or convincing, contributing to its rational appeal by means of real or apparent proof (88).

When considering reenactments of violence against trans(itioning) subjects, Nichols' summary begs a pointed question: *of what do we still need to be reminded and persuaded?* As amplifications of affect and empathy, reenactments serve to visualize the impossible, and to place bodies in places where they no longer live. However, reenactments also force viewing publics into two subject positions: that of the offender or that of the offended. In the introduction to a dossier of articles that approach the complexities of reenactment, Jonathan Kahana claims "If social documentary is always at some level a problem of movement—from artifact to explanation; from viewing to affect or action—the use of reenactment in documentary reinforces it" (58). Such a problem begs further attention to other aesthetic strategies employed in documentary to aesthetically communicate violence against marginalized people.

Made in 1989, *Tongues Untied* is a performative documentary directed by Marlon Riggs, which interrogates intersections of racism, homophobia and blackness. A collaborative project made with many artists, friends and cultural contemporaries, Riggs stages a series of reenactments and performative vignettes to tell a story of self-making and community building amidst crushingly racist and phobic social and political pressures. I return to Riggs here as an example employed by many film theorists (Renov; Nichols) that remains relevant to our contemporary thinking.

When reenacting a violent, homophobic episode from his past, Riggs refuses to play himself and casts another, thus shifting the power



dynamic inherent in the story's re-telling. In doing so, Riggs has rendered himself – and his experiences – multiple, and within community. Of the decision made to cast an actor as himself, Nichols notes, “The absence of Riggs’s own body from the reenactment strengthens the sense in which this representation of the past is a citation, an iteration, a link in a much longer chain of racist acts in which the doer gains his power from the power of iteration itself.” He continues, “This reenactment of a traumatic event in *Tongues Untied* functions less to carry out the work of mourning that follows trauma than to register an apprehension of the power of a past event, a power Riggs contests” (81). What then can we learn from considering Riggs alongside cultural production focused on violence against trans(itioning) subjects?

Riggs summarized *Tongues Untied* as a project aimed to “shatter the nation's brutalizing silence on matters of sexual and racial difference.” Like many works of New Queer Cinema, *Tongues* utilizes genre-blending techniques to foreground political commentary – in this case, the silence and neglect of the AIDS crisis, which contributed to the death of so many, Riggs included. For filmmakers contending with histories of violence against trans(itioning) people, genre-blending documentary forms offer new pathways for representational possibilities, and invite critical attention to the violence and shared realities.

Rosa von Praunheim's *I Am My Own Woman* (1992) is an early example of reenactment deployed as aesthetic strategy of representational rebuttal⁸⁶ and political resistance. Based on the autobiography *Ich bin meine eigene Frau* by Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, von Praunheim's docu-drama tells the life story of an East German, transvestite, antique dealer who survived Nazi persecution.⁸⁷ Scenes from von Mahlsdorf's life are dramatized and reenacted by actors in

⁸⁶ Formative texts from trans history are made visible throughout the storytelling, namely a copy of *The Transvestite* (1991) by Dr. Magnus Hirshfeld, a foundational research text about trans(itioning) subjects in medicine.

⁸⁷ von Mahlsdorf would become an early member of Germany's gay liberation movement by organizing parties and meetings, and appear in many gay and lesbian movies such as Heiner Carow's *Coming Out* (1989)

various stages of her coming-of-age, and the realist re-staging is guided by von Mahlsdorf herself, who is both in, and then never far outside of, frame. Throughout the telling, von Mahlsdorf summarizes her gender identity as being one of her own making. She remains satisfied in a non-passing, non-surgically modified body, and excited by the hybridity and resulting relationship between her body and her dress. Here, von Mahlsdorf's process of self-making, and rejection of a socially legible gendered whole, becomes a site of active political resistance and



survival. This strategic lack of a fixed identity becomes a focal point in Jens Giersdorf's essay "Why Does Charlotte von Mahlsdorf Curtsy? Representations of National Queerness in a Transvestite Hero,"⁸⁸ which compares national constructions of queerness between East Germany and North America after the 2004 Broadway re-staging of von Mahlsdorf's story in *I Am My Own Wife*.⁸⁹

Rosa von Praunheim's collaboration with von Mahlsdorf in the filmmaking marks an integral moment in the politics of reenactment, wherein the represented gain control over their representation. This thread of collaborative control shared between directors and trans(itioning) subjects is further explored through the animated documentary work of Montreal-based illustrator Jess Mac.

⁸⁸ Published in 2006, Giersdorf discusses how von Mahlsdorf's life allows him to comment on the postcolonial "erasure of national specificity through an export of dominant paradigms of queer identity from North America." (171).

⁸⁹ *I Am My Own Wife* was staged as a one-person show by playwright Doug Wright and went on to win a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award.

ANIMATED DOCUMENTARY

Animation and documentary have shared long, overlapping histories as forms mobilized to illustrate and emphasize. Recently, a proliferation of feature-length animated projects such as *Waltz With Bashir* (2008) have re-drawn attention to the hybrid form, as a manner through which makers manage memory and the related aesthetic suturing between past and present realities (Landesman 2011).⁹⁰ Annabelle Honess Roe's comprehensive study of animated documentary (2013) illuminates numerous pathways for critical inquiry into the cinematic treatment of violence against trans(itioning) subjects.

Roe suggests that little attention has been paid to theories of animated documentary⁹¹ on account of a hierarchy-of-making which suggests that projects are most often made by animators first, who then approach documentary as form second, thus relegating most content into the canon of animation. Traditional documentary theorists (Nichols 1994) contend that documentaries are dependent on authenticity, and indexical relationships between images and events, thus animation proposes challenges to assumed generic ontologies. However, through evoking John Grierson's definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality" (1933, 8), and Charles Solomon's dual distinctions of animation – projects that are recorded frame-by-frame and where the "illusion of motion is created rather than recorded," (cited in Roe 2013, 5), Roe suggests new potentials for animation as a viable and necessary intervention into documentary form.⁹²

Roe proposes animation as an epistemological project that reveals depth and context to

⁹⁰ Animation has made a re-emergence in live action documentaries such as *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) dir. Michael Moore, and in autobiographical projects such as *Persepolis* (2007) dir. Marjane Satrapi. For contemporary work, see *Waves* (2013) dir. Ahmed Nour and *The Wanted 18* (2014) dir. Amed Showali and Paul Cowan.

⁹¹ Though animation existed in prior non-fiction forms, the first animated documentary is considered to be *The Sinking of the Lusitania* (1918) by American animator Winsor McCay.

⁹² Here, Roe is in dialogue with animation scholars Patrick (2004) and Strøm (2003, 2015).

viewers that live-action often cannot, and organizes the genre into three categories of function: mimetic substitution, non-mimetic substitution and evocation. Both mimetic and non-mimetic substitutions rely on an absence of original material, and invite supplementation through animation. For example, a film about dinosaurs requires a creative treatment of physical representation. Where mimetic substitutions endeavour to remain as close to reality as possible, non-mimetic substitutions accept the creative charge of adding additional content and meaning. We can recognize these strategies in animated sequences, which attempt to visualize specifics of narrative storytelling. For Roe, evocation is the third categorical function of animation in documentary, which assists in the imagining of the affective, the persuasive, and the invisible facets of description. In theorizing the epistemological potentials of the form, Roe proposes that “Animation invites us to imagine, to put something of ourselves into what we see on screen, to make connections between non-realist images and reality” (6).



Made in collaboration with indigenous trans women in Saskatchewan, Jess Mac’s *Where We Were Not* is a four-part animated moving-image project about criminalization in Canada. *Feeling Reserved: Alexis’ Story* features voice-over narration by Alexis, discussing the

experience of being dropped in the country without her jacket or shoes in the middle of winter by police. Known as “Starlight Tours,” this process of human removal is a racist protocol enacted by Saskatoon police as way to “sober up the natives.” Mac’s striking animation tells a story about many intersecting realities.

Feeling Reserved begins with an animated representation of a woman’s face. Immediately, one is called to question the relationship between the face and the speaking subject. Are we looking at Alexis? What does trans look like in this context, and is trans what we imagine(d)? Similar to the opening sequence of *Middle Sexes*, we can identify headlights of a vehicle – in this case, presumed to be the police – dancing across and amidst falling snow. News footage about “the Stonechild decision” is layered atop a night sky scene. Neil Stonechild was a 17-year-old aboriginal boy found frozen to death in rural Saskatoon, having been delivered to his death by police after a night spent drinking. Viewers understand that we are hearing a different version of the same story from Alexis; only, she survived to tell the tale.

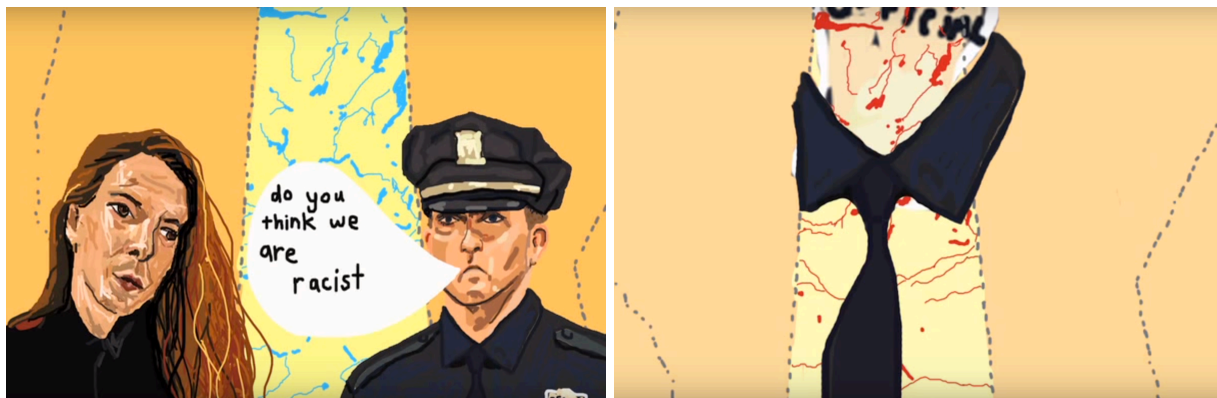


“Yes, I was intoxicated,” Alexis admits, “but I was not violent or confrontational. That’s not me.” Stereotypical associations between substance abuse and indigenous communities are

well researched.⁹³ Alexis differentiates herself from the meta-narrative while also locating herself within the familiar scene. Mac illuminates archival footage of Saskatoon through an illustrated postcard, yet punctures the purportedly picturesque images with the reality of Alexis' experience. To whom does the postcard version of any city belong? As we hear more about Alexis' removal, Mac multiplies drawings of her face, rendering her representative of many, in both trans and indigenous communities.

This violence is common, yet hearing this story is a rarity.

Alexis' Starlight Tour⁹⁴ summary concludes with her being picked up by an elderly couple that offered to drive her back to the city, and 'reserved' in *Feeling Reserved* shifts in meaning, from that of indigeneity to that of hesitation.

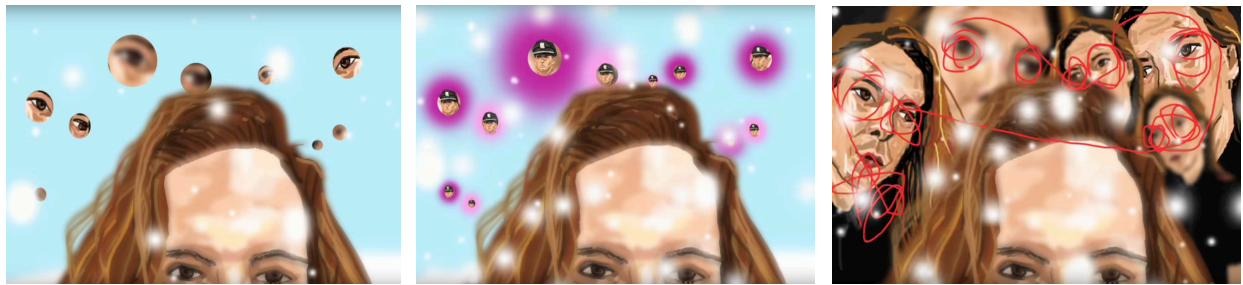


To showcase the shift, Mac draws the borders of the province of Saskatchewan and highlights rivers in blue, which shatter through the land like veins in a body. The application of a police badge to the map – literalizing police presence – turns the blue waters of every river red, much like the blood that now runs through them. Water as life. Blood as death. The map of the province becomes the skin of slain indigenous bodies.

⁹³ For further reading see: Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart's "The historical trauma response among natives and its relationship with substance abuse: A Lakota illustration. In *Journal of psychoactive drugs* 35, no. 1 (2003): 7-13.

⁹⁴ Violent removal of indigenous populations in Canada is rampant – from the relocation of Inuit populations to the Arctic in the 1950s, to the many First Nation's reserves which are inadequately supported today – Starlight Tours' also known as the Saskatoon freezing deaths – are yet another example.

Amidst a summarized conversation between Alexis and the police about whether or not the Saskatoon police are racist, Mac reminds us again of Stonechild, raising an illustration of his face into a star-filled sky. Stars, like the snowfall in the first frames, pepper the scene, as Mac again relies on duplication and multiplicity to illustrate systemic and ongoing cultural devastation. Stonechild joins a sky full of other murdered indigenous people, forever looking down upon the racist colonial landscape responsible for extinguishing them.



The first sign of daylight in *Feeling Reserved* arrives as the stars in the sky turn into eyeballs, omniscient observers of the ongoing scene. One can't help but remember Mark Thompspon's call for elders in the companion videos to *Two-Spirits*. Within this new form of collective seeing comes new strategy. Understanding that she is not alone, that she is one of many who have experienced this specific form of police brutality, inspires Alexis to lie to police inquiries about experiences of racism as a form of self-protection. Only through seeing what happened to other indigenous people at the hands police did Alexis know not to speak.⁹⁵ *Feeling Reserved* becomes an intricately textured portrait of intersecting realities – lived experiences that extend beyond the singularity of Alexis' experiences – and becomes an invitation to engage connections between trans and indigenous communities.

In their article "Settler Colonialism and the Politics of Grief: Theorising a Decolonising

⁹⁵ I am reminded of Park's discussion of Indian Residential Schools – taken up in the pages that follow – as Alexis' silence could be interpreted as "the collision of *literal* death with *figurative* death, or the kind of wrought through assimilation," (278) or the relinquishment of Indigenous identity in pursuit of safety.

Transitional Justice for Indian Residential Schools,” Augustine Park highlights the settler colonialist imperative to eliminate indigenous populations in Canada, by regarding their existence as “ungrievable.” Here, Park joins Judith Butler in the proposal of grief as a political project.⁹⁶ The aims of Park’s essay are twofold: a) transformative justice for settler colonial violence must engage a politics of grief, and b) politics of grief must resist a purely affective articulation. Park’s essay focuses on a single case study of deaths at Indian Residential Schools; however, the theoretical framework can be applied to the collaboration between Mac and Alexis as well.

Through *Feeling Reserved*, we can locate the racist agenda of the Saskatoon police as deeply embedded in the project of settler colonialism, one which operates through a “logic of elimination.”⁹⁷ Park explains “Indigenous life is derealised as not quite human and indigenous populations are exposed to precarity,⁹⁸ which are structural conditions that bring about their destruction” (274). Through the literalized removal of indigenous bodies from the urban landscape, Saskatoon police are actualizing the colonialist imperative to extinguish native populations.

FROM POLICE TO PRISON

Made in 2006, *Cruel and Unusual* engages five trans women who have served time in men’s prisons. Directed by Janet Baus, co-director of *Lesbian Avengers Eat Fire Too* (1993) with Su Freidrich, Reid Williams, producer of *Dangerous Living: Coming Out in the Developing*

⁹⁶ See *Precarious Life* (2004) by Judith Butler.

⁹⁷ Park is relying upon the work/definition of Patrick Wolfe (2006) who states that the ultimate goal of elimination is access to territory.

⁹⁸ Park is again in conversation with Butler who notes that precarity is not evenly distributed, but rather mediated through social and political forces.

World (2003), and Dan Hunt,⁹⁹ producer of *After Stonewall* (1999), the project won awards at Frameline (SF), Outfest (LA), and the GLADD Media Awards. While *Cruel and Unusual* avoids reenactment, filmmakers deploy a subtle version of similar, staged re-visiting and re-imagining. When no longer incarcerated, each subject is given opportunity to revisit the ghosted hauntings of their former, pre-prison life. Viewers gain access to the garden shed inhabited by one subject while she was homeless, and to the street corner once occupied by another throughout her tenure doing sex work. The precarious lives lived by trans women featured in *Cruel and Unusual* present new

forms of social and political undoing, and highlight systemic barriers to reintegration and related recovery. In one instance, we learn of a subject's continual re-incarceration, and are left to wonder how and if she might ever escape the system. The "before and after"



story-telling structure of *Cruel and Unusual* is not one of transition, but one of prison. Gross neglect of therapeutic needs, lack of access to hormone replacement therapy, strip searches, shaming, and solitary confinement are experiences shared by many of the documentary subjects. As viewers, we bear witness to the egregious treatment of trans bodies by the prison industrial complex, and are reminded of the transphobic, racist and punitive logics of state systems which continue to isolate trans(itioning) people.

⁹⁹ Years after *Cruel and Unusual*, Dan Hunt would go on to direct *Mr. Angel* (2013), a feature-length documentary portrait of Buck Angel, the first FTM porn star.

The documentary takes its name from the 8th Amendment to the United States Constitution, which reads: “Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.” Through interviews with subjects, doctors, and lawyers, trans women are identified as one of the most vulnerable and neglected populations in the US prison system, often spending time in “protective custody,” which is an evasive label for solitary confinement. While *Cruel and Unusual* returns in many ways to conventional documentary form, its positioning and treatment of trans(itioning) subjects within the narrative aligns the work with the more experimental, responsive offerings which precede it in this chapter. Now a decade old, *Cruel and Unusual* is a formative precursor to contemporary discourses about trans people in prison.

In the film, Dean Spade and Dana Turner – both lawyers for the trans advocacy group Sylvia Rivera Law Project – articulate intersectional oppressions facing trans women of colour specifically, and highlight the failure of the prison industrial complex to account for their needs. Spade and Turner offer a number of reasons why trans people of colour are disproportionately incarcerated, including racism, homelessness and unrelenting workplace discrimination.

In the contemporary moment, Laverne Cox, trans-identified lead-actress in the Netflix series *Orange Is The New Black* and

one of the most recognized trans celebrities in North America, is using her industrial clout to produce a documentary about CeCe Macdonald, a black trans women from Minnesota who was incarcerated in a men’s



prison. *Free CeCe* (2016) interrogates systemic and intersectional oppressions disproportionately affecting trans women of colour in America, and marks a powerful collaboration between activist communities and the industrial mainstream. Cox's mainstream recognition highlights new attention to populations previously overlooked by mainstream media machinery. In a recently released clip from post-production, prison abolitionist and scholar Angela Davis remarks, "Focusing on the experiences of trans people, and especially trans women of colour, lets us know where we have to go in the struggle for the liberation of all."¹⁰⁰

Artists and activists working on the frontlines of black liberation, like Davis, offer key tools of representative resistance for trans(itioning) communities. For example, methods employed by organizers of Black Lives Matter are reflected in many of the moving-image projects interrogated in this chapter. Aesthetic strategies – in particular, the use of animation to challenge the pursuit of realism, the foregrounding of performance to re-organize authorial control, and the deployment of collaborative practice – each illuminate necessary complexities of both making and watching moving-image projects that focus on violence against trans(itioning) people, and contest and challenge depictions of trans(itioning) subjects in the mainstream.

¹⁰⁰ Link to view: <http://www.freececedocumentary.net/>

CHAPTER SIX: BETWEEN YOU AND ME
Moral Panics, Trans Studies and the Family

Link to View: <https://vimeo.com/163591595>

Password: BYAM



In 2002, Michael Skoor was convicted of 20+ counts of child sexual abuse and sentenced to 29 years in a California state prison. That same year, I was introduced to organizers of the UCLA Clothesline Project, a sexual violence awareness and advocacy organization seeking to help survivors of childhood sexual violence, like myself, come to terms with their experiences. While our stations on opposite sides of this kind of violence were at that time unconnected, our paths would begin to cross as I fell in love with Michael's daughter, Rebekah. To Rebekah, Michael was an adoring, diligent, attentive, and consistent father. As the local pastor of their San Diego Lutheran Church, he was well respected and well liked, and news of his actions sent insurmountable shockwaves through their family and community.

While Rebekah looked to me for support and understanding for a circumstance far outside the scope of her comprehension, I too was looking for support, in the form of rage and collectivized action and disdain for this type of violence enacted specifically on women and

children. Our collision of contexts rendered all easily assumed emotional networks impossible, and inspired many years of conversation about violence, gender, prison, and shame.

Between You and Me (BYAM) is a short documentary that initiates dialogue between often non-speaking subjects: perpetrator and perpetrated. *BYAM* premiered at Hot Docs, the Canadian International Documentary Film Festival, screened at Inside Out: Toronto's LGBT International Film Festival, and will go online as one of the lead projects for CBC's new Digital Docs series in July 2016.

METHODS and RESEARCH

There is a valid point to be made regarding the camera's ability to enable distance at moments of problematic proximity.
– Marsha and Devin Orgeron

Irit Rogoff (2006) contends that 'practice driven theory' affords makers and thinkers a new set of permissions: "Permission to not cover all the bases all the time, permission to start in the middle, permission to mix fact and fiction, permission to invent languages, permission to not support every claim by the proof of some prior knowledge, permission to privilege subjectivity as a mode of engaging the world and its woes, permission to be obscure and permission to chart a complete different path of how we got here, at this very moment" (20). In no uncertain terms, *BYAM* has been fourteen years in the making. I have long wondered how, and in what capacity, I might fashion this story. Michael's circumstances have always felt akin to a backdraft: contained fire – desire, shame, and repression – introduced to oxygen too quickly, leading to ultimate and devastating combustion. Before he was known as a sex offender, Michael was known as someone else: a father, a pastor, a husband, a son, a lover, and a leader. What can we make of those concurrent realities?

One characteristic sign of a backdraft is the appearance of smoke around the frame of doors and windows in which the fire is contained. Firefighters sometimes remark on a slight vibration in the surrounding area due to the contained heat. *BYAM* is a meditation on the smoke and the vibrations that have informed Michael's devastating decisions. A meditation, rather than an exposé, the project points to many missing pieces, and utilizes home video footage alongside contemporary conversation to productively illuminate the gaps. Accordingly, *BYAM* is informed by three independent yet informing research trajectories: photography (Barthes 1981), theories of home video (Citron 1999; Moran 2002; Orgeron and Orgeron 2007; Zimmerman; 1995, 2007) and prison abolition (Davis 2003; Spade 2011). Moving and still image scholarship informs the making of the work, offering frame and historical context, while contemporary prison abolition activism informs the questions asked within the project, and troubles the complicated alliances that I seek. By employing a collage of technologies – letters, newly recorded footage, home movies, family photos, audio recordings – I hope to imagine new possibilities for the telling of overlapping, and at times contesting, stories.

PHOTOGRAPHY

In one of his most provocative assertions, Roland Barthes proclaims that the photographic image “ultimately looks like anyone except the person it represents” (102). Understanding that filmic representations function largely on the level of myth, Barthes encourages our suspicion of subjectivities as they relate to truths, and challenges the means by which they are articulated and therefore received. If we borrow Michel Foucault's understanding of history as a discontinuously constructed discourse of events now recreated and reimagined, Barthes' theory of filmic subjectivity can be summarized as a collection of parts and signifiers, never really ‘known’ and always historically contingent. The collection of family photos I have of Michael is haunting.

Otherwise innocuous pictures of Michael wearing priest attire holding his children take on impossible new meaning, and are rendered almost unusable in this project because the connections to pedophilia are too easy.

Published in 1980, Barthes' *Camera Lucida*¹⁰¹ considers the impact of photography on the viewing subject. Deeply personal, *Lucida* traverses intimate, emotional boundaries between Barthes and his mother, while concurrently developing twinning concepts of *studium* and *punctum* in photography. For Barthes, *studium* denotes the



political and cultural meaning of photographs – meanings that belong in part to discourses of art and history – while *punctum*¹⁰² quite literally refers to the piercing point, or the wounding capacities of the image. It is this embrace of the subjective and vulnerable piercing detail that orients the logic of my photographic encounters in *BYAM*. Due to the irreparable nature of Michael's known offenses, this piercing point rightfully interferes with Barthes' notion of "the reality effect," wherein gestures and happenings are seemingly absolved from broader coded meaning. Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1977) argues that the proliferation of photography in culture has encouraged a "chronic voyeuristic relation" to the image. I can feel the ways in which my use of photography in *Between You and Me* has been restricted on account of this predicted

¹⁰¹ For Barthes' earlier engagements with photography, see *Mythologies* (1957).

¹⁰² In 'The Third Meaning' (1971), Barthes proposes an accidental and/or unplanned value in and of the photograph. One might consider this added value the *punctum*.

voyeurism. Michael is always and forever a man who has sexually offended against children. As such, photography is employed in two ways throughout *BYAM*, a) as emblematic of family ritual via the motel montage series, eventually revealing Michael's absence from the sequence/family, and b) as necessary proof of the exchange between us at the end of the movie. Critical to the project is the understanding that Michael and I are in continued relationship, and that we – Rebekah and me specifically – are not approaching the work without his explicit permission.

HOME MOVIES

My exploration of home movie and video scholarship follows two complementary trajectories: a) the significance of home video (Citron 1999; Moran 2002; Zimmerman; 1995, 2007) and b) the relationship between home recordings and those charged with opportunities to make something new of these previously unrelated archival offerings (Orgeron and Orgeron 2007). In service of the production of *BYAM*, Michael's family graciously granted me access to 12 hours – representing 30 years – of home video recordings, in addition to 80+ photos of their family. The collection offers glimmers and insights into a family in the making, and a family that is breaking. I asked Michael to reflect upon the videos in one of my letters to him in prison. He responded:

To answer your question, I remember them vividly. Most were filmed with those huge VHS cameras that were perched atop one shoulder. At the time, my strong intention was to create a document that members of the family could look back at and re-live, not only seeing the scenes, but bringing back the emotions as well. I am sure, now, that were I somehow able to view them for myself that is exactly what would take place: I would be an emotional puddle. But even then, at the time during filming, I felt them to be a vital record of what was unfolding in our common and interweaving lives as an extended family. Like the movie *Just a Boy*¹⁰³ we can see over

¹⁰³ I remain unclear as to which movie this is referring. My closest guess is that he might be referring to *About a Boy* (2002)? Another option would be that he is referring to *Boyhood* (2014), which he would never have seen, but perhaps had opportunity to read about in prison.

decades, the aging members of this family, their growing and becoming, their evolution and decline.

Patricia Zimmerman (2007) reminds us that “home movies negotiate between private memories and social histories in a variety of forms and iterations; there is never a one-to-one correspondence between the empirical fact and the representation” (4).¹⁰⁴ Michael’s musings offer a number of critical and flawed intentions in the recording and production of memories for and by his family. Birth announcements in 1986 which are meant to be celebratory, in fact illuminate incredible

ambivalence and anxiety; recordings of children “being kids” in 1992 reveal pre-teens entirely uninterested in being captured by their parents through these emergent technologies.



Michelle Citron’s *Home*

Movies and Other Necessary Fictions (1999) provides an incisive, feminist platform upon which to situate Michael’s home video thinking and related making. Citron’s work articulates the production of fictions in the construction of family archives, which often illuminate narratives of a harmonious nuclear family, fantasies of class participation, and the avoidance of trauma. The Skoor home video collection offered to me reveals their family only ever at the beach. The footage is captured during bi-annual visits to the Indiana Dunes, wherein extended family rent cabins at the same location during the same time each year.¹⁰⁵ Family members take turns using

¹⁰⁴ Zimmerman also reminds that home movies do not work as a unified discourse, but rather one that is imaginative and often contradictory.

¹⁰⁵ A tradition that still continues today.

the camera, and we are invited to encounter multiple subjective and technological perspectives as they participate in the historicization of a supposedly shared family event.

Historical technological trajectories offered in James Moran's *There's No Place Like Home Video* (2002) succinctly summarize shifts that enable the production and proliferation of home videos with and by the family.¹⁰⁶ Specifically, the democratization of new technologies made consumer-based electronics widely available, boasting accessible price points, and remarkable ease of use strategies.¹⁰⁷ The shift from cost-prohibitive film – often reserved for special events such as weddings and parties – to video, allowed for an abundance of recording possibilities. Michael's summary of his home movie memories lock his family in a moment in time, when home videos were recorded and played on VHS in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁰⁸ Knowing that Michael went to prison before digital recording devices such as iPhones and GoPros were sutured to the family means that he reflects upon the current climate of 'record, retake, and re-filter' as a distant fantasy.

Writing about *Grizzly Man* (2005), *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003), and *Tarnation* (2003), Marsha and Devin Orgeron interrogate documentaries that rely on recordings of people from purportedly "pre-documentary" lives, and ask critical questions about the role of the director as both editor and interpreter of the pre-recorded. What is at stake in my reimagining and reuse of the Skoor family history? Understanding that the personal image archive has already undergone a process of editing and revision – via the family members who are recording – we know that we are only seeing the parts of the family during moments when the camera is both on and pointed. What versions of the family are we being allowed to see, and what versions

¹⁰⁶ Wherein family becomes a hobby, on an activity in and of itself deserving of recording.

¹⁰⁷ For another succinct summary of this process see Jonathan Coopersmith's "Do-it-Yourself Pornography."

¹⁰⁸ Legacies of home video also consider the shift in authorship from parents to children. In particular, I am thinking about the moment in BYAM when Rebekah and her cousin take the camera to chase the storm, ultimately revealing the destruction of the motel sign, and the symbol of a cohesive family in the film.

of the family are we missing? Writing about Andrew Jarecki's *Capturing the Friedmans*, Orgeron and Orgeron remark that the use of home video "begins to demonstrate the ways that contemporary self-documentaries can shape their own eventual third-personal presentations" (58). When considering the knowledge of Michael's offenses, we are often left to wonder about the construction of his selfhood – and fatherhood – through home video.

One temporary moment of authorial switch occurs in *BYAM* when Michael picks up a still camera and shoots back at the video camera that is recording him. In that instance, we are asked to consider who is looking at whom, and why? As publics bear witness to the story of his undoing – a story of which he is no longer in control – we are reminded of his lack of agency, first in home video recordings, and now in prison.

PRISON

Critical Resistance seeks to build an international movement to end the prison industrial complex (PIC) by challenging the belief that caging and controlling people makes us safe. We believe that basic necessities such as food, shelter, and freedom are what really make our communities secure. As such, our work is part of global struggles against inequality and powerlessness. The success of the movement requires that it reflect communities most affected by the PIC. Because we seek to abolish the PIC, we cannot support any work that extends its life or scope.

– Mission Statement from CriticalResistance.org

In a four-part web series entitled *Prison Abolition + Prefiguring the World You Want to Live In* (2013), trans activists Reina Gossett and Dean Spade of the Sylvia Rivera Law Project reflect upon critical questions asked of abolitionist frameworks and movements. Gossett summarizes investments in activism that are grounded in a desire to work "with people who are seen as disposable, dangerous or disruptive"¹⁰⁹ in order to ensure that "harm that people have

¹⁰⁹ Link to view: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDQIW1uJ8uQ>

experienced does not get reenacted on another person or community.” At its most fundamental articulation, Gossett asserts “abolition means no one is disposable.” For Gossett and Spade, this work involves meticulous interrogation of structural institutions of violence such as prisons, police, and immigration systems, which often determine who is expendable, and to structure reform “modeled on a different logic,” one that is not reliant upon strategies of punishment and exile.

In Part 3¹¹⁰ of the series, Spade asks: “But what about the dangerous people?” To answer this question so commonly asked of abolitionists, Gossett is quick to cite the work of Ruthie Gilmore – a founder of Critical Resistance – who asserts: “no one is innocent.” Innocent and guilty are created and maintained as oppositional



categories by systems of political and social control in order to remain powerful. Gossett and Spade trace lineages of this thinking to slavery and capitalism, where the state is dependent upon the exile and dehumanization of certain categories of social subjects in order to maintain their power, a process that disproportionately impacts poor people, indigenous people and people of colour. Narratives of danger and containment haunt the entirety of *BYAM*; even as the narrative stays away from prison and remains immersed in home movie history, the reality of Michael’s confinement is inescapable. Through conversation with Rebekah about Michael’s history, *BYAM*

¹¹⁰ Link to view: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4WSHvZetkw>

illustrates various tensions about incarceration and reformation illuminated by and through Spade and Gossett's conversation.

ARCHIVING and AMENDING the SCRIPT

Three versions of the script are attached to this chapter. I include them here as a visual mapping of collaboration, and a textual representation of the incredibly restricted means by which Michael and I communicate. SCRIPT 1 is a letter, which I assembled by pulling anecdotes from years worth of letter correspondence between us in preparation for this project. Understanding that my only contact with Michael for the purposes of recording would be through prison telephones calls in 15-minute increments, my hope was to offer a way for him to tell more complete stories.

That said, as the project progressed I became increasingly uneasy with the clarity of his storytelling; details were too clean, and moments of revelation were delivered too succinctly. In unconscious response, I moved away from Michael as narrator of the project and leaned into the conversation I was having with Rebekah as the organizing narrative logic of the piece. Admittedly, I feel that much has been lost in the removal of his voice, and find that much is regained when he is encountered in additional footage, soon to be available on CBC.¹¹¹ Michael's story of himself is an integral component of my storytelling, and while it informs the making of the story with Rebekah, I fear it replicates a system of power that the film attempts to contest, one wherein people – therapists, prison wardens, priests, his family members, and now me – speak for people, rather than people speaking for themselves. SCRIPT 2 reflects hand-written edits of SCRIPT 1 sent to me from Michael in prison, and exists as a small, but important, example of his editing and re-telling. SCRIPT 3 is the transcript of the final movie.

¹¹¹ Further detail about the interactive, multi-video format offered by CBC's new Digital Doc platform follows in the section: PUBLIC EXHIBITION and DIGITAL MEDIA.

SCRIPT 1

Text on screen: “The life of Odysseus was shattered or, in the Greek sense, “Catastrophied,” overturned. He is forcibly removed from his natural place, from the place that belongs to him, but also to which he belongs, forcibly separated from those who surrounded him and who form his human world. And he has but one wish, which is to return home.

However, for several reasons the voyage back will be extremely painful and difficult, full of pitfalls and almost insurmountable trials. These events unfold in a world that is not our human world, and there is the constant possibility of never finding his way back to an authentic human existence.”

-Luc Perry, Parabola

Dear Chase,

This letter follows rather closely on the heels of my last, in part because two letters arrived from you recently, (one had been) in transit for 114 days! At the time you were in the midst of a lot of travel, and had seen our videos from the Dunes. To answer your question, I remember them vividly. Most were filmed with those huge VHS cameras that were perched atop one shoulder. At the time, my strong intention was to create a document that members of the family could look back at and re-live, not only seeing the scenes, but bringing back the emotions as well. I am sure, now, that were I somehow able to view (those videos) for myself that is exactly what would take place: I would be an emotional puddle. But even then, at the time during filming, I felt them to be a vital record of what was unfolding in our common and interweaving lives as an extended family. Like the movie “Just a Boy” we can see over decades of growing, the aging members of this family, their growing and becoming, their evolution and decline.

Text on screen: BETWEEN MEN¹¹²

The strangest things come across my mind at the oddest of times, but most of my deep reflections take place in the evenings, as I give silent thanks for having somehow managed to simply get through another long day. I have been tightly confined for thirteen years. Over that span of time I’ve been placed into several facilities, on many yards, and shuffled, often with no warning, from one bunk, rack, slab to another. It has occurred to me that the place where I currently sleep, #170 on Chino’s A Yard Joshua Hall, has become the place where I’ve lasted the longest. I am closing in on four years in this particular locale.

Chino is a rarity: an “urban prison.” Most of the 34 prisons (in California) are located in remote areas: the deep eastern deserts, the very-far northwest corner, out-posts of the San Joachin valley. Chino is the middle of, well, Chino. In 1941 it was rural, now it’s just all part of LA.

¹¹² BETWEEN MEN was the title of earlier iterations of the project, riffing in part on Eve Sedgwick’s book of the same name, published in 1985. As the scope of the project changed, so too did the title.

California spends more on its bloated prison system than on all of higher education: northwards of ten BILLION each year. Eventually, somewhere in one of the 34 massive prisons, the building pressure will result in a human explosion. Then the overseers, with stern and solemn expressions will point accusingly and pronounce: “See? Animals. Monsters.” We need MORE control. More cages. More prisons. More punishment.”

The local prevailing wisdom holds, vehemently, that, once confined to the pen, almost everyone from one’s former life is going to disappear. It might take three years, or five. By the ten-year mark the prisoner is almost entirely on his-or-her own. It’s just a fact of life. We’re mostly invisible and especially in the era of social media when it’s simply too much hassle to remain in touch using snail mail, trying to overcome the substantial obstacles to visiting in person, and those collect telephone calls are ridiculously expensive. All true enough. And now, thirteen years into it, I look around and unhappily acknowledge that the accepted wisdom is pretty much on target. I am grateful, therefore, and somewhat embarrassed to be of the few, significant exceptions.

Looking through the fence bordering the mini-yard of dorm, I often watch the busy traffic buzzing by a mere hundred meters away along Central Blvd. I see joggers, bike riders, and motor vehicles of every make and description right in front of me. It’s frankly disorienting. What we call the main yard is ugly: a motley mixture of grasses, dirt, gopher holes and even some wildflowers. When open, it’s the soccer pitch, the softball field, and the sit-and-gaze-into-space place. But mostly it’s closed and empty.

I try to take a fast daily walk of at least 30 minutes duration, and often for an hour. We’re always subject to “program interruptions” -- lockdowns, quarantines, staff-shortages, and so forth -- and so if I can string together 30 days in a row, it’s notable. But (recently) I hit a true streak, which began back on 28 October. Somehow I was able to get outside every day through the autumn, and then the winter, and on into the spring. I walked through cold rains, a 60-day bout with bronchitis, the occasional twingy hip. I kept expecting each day to be the last but I kept going through seven months, three weeks and a day – 234 days without a miss – the last day turned out to be my sister Kathy’s birthday on 18 June. I reckoned the distance at about six hundred miles, some of it on our mini-yard -- 100 paces in each direction -- and some on the much larger main yard. But most of that trampling was, within my mind, taking place on beaches, mountain tracks in the Cascades, Sierra Nevada, the Rockies, and Blue-Ridge Mountains. I often carried on imaginary conversations (in my head.) After a day off on the 19th of June, I went strolling again on the 20th. My mind took me to the campus of Indiana University in the dead of winter. It was 96 degrees Fahrenheit here, but I felt snow all around.

I can study patches of ground cover for long periods of time, watching the open warfare of plants compete for light, water and soil nutrients. But, as with many of the involuntarily confined, I find that special joys are reserved for the birds. Of all descriptions, sizes, colorations, calls and habits.

I was amazed one day when a parakeet showed up. Even more astonishing was the fact that this took place during a significant Santa Ana wind event. During Santa Anas, the prevailing winds from the west shift to “offshore” and we are treated to hot, dry, blustery howlers from Utah and

Arizona. They are called “devil winds” for a reason. Clouds of dusk sweep over us. The humidity drops to 5%. Everything is gritty.

But nothing but a lockdown interrupts my morning exercise walk around the mini-yard. So I was almost alone when I was tramping about, my eyes slitted against the blowing dust and regularly spitting out dirt. From the corner of my eye I caught a small flash of blue. Looking down I beheld a parakeet standing on our sidewalk, its feathers ruffling in the strong winds. I quickly looked around for our resident cats who were fortunately nowhere in sight. Somehow, this budgie has escaped from its cage and had come a long distance through horrendous conditions to a much larger cage designed for the keeping of humans.

I had no idea what to do. Rescue it? Not bloody likely.

Even if one of us somehow managed to capture the wayward bird, it was, by definition, contraband. No pets allowed. My walk temporarily forgotten, I just stared down, thinking to myself, “You are in an extremely hostile environment, little one.” I could relate to the plight of the small bird. Now voices began intruding into my contemplation. “Hey! Look over there! Catch it! Somebody get a sheet!” And so on. At the approach of the first would-be-captor, the parakeet took flight and fluttered up to the roof of the dorm, now utterly out of reach of any prisoner. Assorted curses filled the air around me. “That thing’s toast,” opined one brilliant observer. I silently agreed, but said nothing. The gusting winds actually pushed the bird across the sloping roof.

I am pretty much helpless to control anything around me. I certainly controlled nothing in this depressing situation. I stood vigil for several more minutes before the feathered blue speck opened its wings and permitted the dry winds to carry it away, tumbling through the air. Did it manage to find safe landing somewhere? I’ll never know. I turned back to my walk, wondering. Would I, ever, find safe landing anywhere? A welcoming home? I had no way of knowing that either. I tasted the dust in my mouth. Kept walking, head down.

The best time of day is almost always when I retreat to my bed. It is here where I activate Michael’s unpatented sleep system. I own a small electric fan. I switch it on and direct flowing air to provide the illusion that I’m outside in the midst of vast spaces. Taped to the underside of the bunk above me is a cardboard sleeve that contains a small CD player. The current disc contains the marvellous noise of crashing ocean waves. I insert the small rubber ear buds, set the machine for continual replay, and in an instant almost all of the dorm noise -- shouting, filthy language, braying laughter, threats, and simple chatter -- fade into insignificance.

A push of a button turns on the small reading lamp beside my head. I can actually begin to believe that I’m simply in a small Amtrak sleeping compartment heading off to... anywhere. I pick up whatever book I am currently reading and disappear into some other world. I smile as I remember with vivid clarity all those occasions when, as a small boy, I would hide beneath the covers with book and flashlight and disappear into the world of Tarzan, or Tom Swift Jr., or my Uncle Scrooge comics until I was gasping for air and wiping sweat from my eyes. Nowadays, the books are different but the travels are the same.

When sleep finally draws near I reach to the netting above me and extract the padded eye-shade I paid a guy to make for me. The elastic strap came from a pair of underwear. Now, in the midst of cacophony all around I, subjectively, am in total darkness with the sound of the ocean singing to me. The mattress is ridiculously thin over the steel sheet but I merely remind myself that I'm out camping, in a sleeping bag on a thin Therm-a-Rest pad, so no worries.

Slumber overtakes me and for a timeless period my dreams take me off to many places, none of them with bars or electrified fences. I slide into peace, for a short while.

Text on screen:

If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously
committing evil deeds,
if it was necessary only to separate them from the rest
of us and destroy them.
But the line between good and evil cuts through the
heart of every human being.
And who is willing to destroy a piece of their own heart?

-Alexander Solzhenitsyn

Text on screen:

Credits

SCRIPT 2: Michael edits sent from prison

Text on screen: Between Men

The strangest things come across my mind at the oddest of times, but most of my deep reflections take place in the evenings, as I give silent thanks for having somehow managed to simply get through another long day. I have been tightly confined for ~~thirteen~~^{thirteen} years. Over that span of time I've been placed into several facilities, on many yards, and shuffled, often with no warning, from one bunk, rack, slab to another. It has occurred to me that the place where I currently sleep, #170 on Chino's A Yard Joshua Hall, has become the place where I've lasted the longest. I am closing in on four years in this particular locale.

Chino is a rarity: an "urban prison." Most of the 34 prisons (in California) are located in remote areas: the deep eastern deserts, the very-far northwest corner, but-posts of the San Joachin valley. Chino is the middle of, well, Chino. In 1941 it was rural, now it's just all part of ~~LA~~^{well over} ~~THE LOS ANGELES METROPOLITAN REGION.~~^{CALIFORNIA'S}

Looking through the fence bordering the mini-yard of dorm, I often watch the busy traffic buzzing by a mere hundred meters away along Central Blvd. I see joggers, bike riders, and motor vehicles of every make and description right in from of me. It's frankly disorienting. What we call the main yard is ugly: a motley mixture of ~~grasses, dirt, gopher holes and even some wildflowers.~~^{weeds,} When open, it's the soccer pitch, the softball field, and the sit-and-gaze-into-space place. But mostly it's closed and empty.

I try to take a fast daily walk of at least 30 minutes duration, and often for an hour. We're always subject to "program interruptions" – lockdowns, quarantines, staff-shortages, and so forth – and so if I can string together 30 days in a row, it's notable. But (recently) I hit a true streak, which began back on 28 October. Somehow I was able to get outside every day through the autumn, and then the winter, and on into the spring. I walked through cold rains, a 60-day bout with bronchitis, the occasional twingy hip. I kept expecting each day to be the last but I kept going through seven months, three weeks and a day – 234 days without a miss – the last day turned out to be my sister Kathy's birthday on 18 June. I reckoned the distance at about six hundred miles, some of it on our mini-yard – 100 paces in each direction – and some on the much larger main yard. But most of that tramping was, within my mind, taking place on beaches, mountain tracks in the Cascades, Sierra Nevada, the Rockies, and Blue-Ridge Mountains. I often carried on imaginary conversations (in my head) ~~LA~~^{LA} ~~AGAINST THE~~^{AGAINST THE} ~~TWISTING TRACKS~~^{TWISTING TRACKS} ~~OF MY HILLS~~^{OF MY HILLS}. After a day off on the 19th of June, I went strolling again on the 20th. My mind took me to the campus of Indiana University in the dead of winter. It was 96 degrees Fahrenheit here, but I felt snow all around.

I can study patches of ground cover for long periods of time, watching the open warfare of plants compete for light, water and soil nutrients. But, as with many of the involuntarily confined, I find that special joys are ~~reserved for the birds.~~^{being} Of all descriptions, sizes, colorations, calls and habits. While I am in awe of our resident red-tail hawks, I am equally delighted by the tiniest of our seasonal residents: the sparrow and finches.

I was amazed one day when a parakeet showed up. Even more astonishing was the fact that this took place during a significant Santa Ana wind event. During Santa Anas, the prevailing winds from the west shift to "offshore" and we are treated to hot, dry, blustery howlers from Utah and Arizona. They are called "devil winds" for a reason. Clouds of dust sweep over us. The humidity drops to 5%. Everything is gritty.

But nothing but a lockdown interrupts my morning exercise walk around the mini-yard. So I was almost alone when I was ~~tramping~~^{stopping} about, my eyes slitted against the blowing dust and regularly spitting out dirt. From the corner of my eye I caught a small flash of blue. Looking down I beheld a parakeet standing on our sidewalk, its feathers ruffling in the strong winds. I quickly looked around for our resident cats who were fortunately nowhere in sight. Somehow, this budgie has escaped from its cage and had come a long distance through horrendous conditions to a much larger cage designed for the keeping of humans.

I had no idea what to do. Rescue it? Not bloody likely.

Potentially usable other comments currently not included in the letter:

California spends more on its bloated prison system than on all of higher education: northwards of ten BILLION ^{DOLLARS US} each year. Eventually, somewhere in one of the 34 massive prisons, the building pressure will result in a human explosion. Then the overseers, with stern and solemn expressions will point accusingly and pronounce: "See? Animals. Monsters. ^{USING} We need MORE control. More cages. More prisons. More punishment."

The local prevailing wisdom holds, vehemently, that, once confined to the pen, almost everyone from one's former life is going to disappear. It might take three years, or five. By the ten-year mark the prisoner is almost entirely on his-or-her own. It's just a fact of life. We're mostly invisible and especially in the era of social media when it's simply too much hassle to remain in touch ^{using} snail mail, trying to overcome the substantial obstacles to visiting in person, and those collect telephone calls are ridiculously expensive. All true enough. And now, ¹⁴thirteen years into it, I look around and unhappily acknowledge that the accepted wisdom is pretty much on target. I am grateful, therefore, and somewhat embarrassed to be of the few, significant exceptions.

After having slowly worked over the years to move from maximum (it's hard to imagine myself as any kind of threat) to medium, down to low security – moving finally from tiny dreadful concrete cells to a wooden dorm with large windows that actually open to my touch – having been given about the best possible job as lead clerk in our library (less than 30% have anything to actually do) – I'd be much larger fool than I've already proven myself to be not to feel a great deal of gratitude.

here

with their days

SCRIPT 3: FINAL

Rebekah: People ask me all the time if I've forgiven him. And I don't know how to answer that. But I can say that I love him, and that it's hard to love someone who has done terrible things. But the terrible things don't undo the love.

TITLE: "between you and me"

Rebekah: I'm nervous every time. It's been 13 years and I've never gone and not been nervous.

Chase: Yeah.

What I was thinking about in terms of going in, actually, is that there's a possibility that something about our outfits might be wrong. So I'm hoping that maybe you two can stay in the parking lot until...?

Rebekah: Well you'll see us go in. Alright, here's how this will go. If these pants are the parking lot, then we'll drive into the parking lot and we'll walk up to this building here. Everyone will line up here out in front, and we'll go in – cameras won't be able to come in here – and this is where they'll decide if our outfits are appropriate and if we have the documentation we need. And if, for whatever reason, we don't have it, we'll come back out to the parking lot. But if we go through, then immediately you'll see us come out the side door and walk down a path. And this will be in front of the electric razor wire. My dad's building is over here, so we'll go in here and then we'll be gone.

All we can take in are ten photos each.

Chase: And nothing about these is gonna get us nailed?

Rebekah: No. Yeah, you can't have any pictures of alcohol, you can't have any nudity, and due to the nature of my dad's offense, you can't have any, like, half-clothed children.

TITLE: "In October 2002, Rebekah's dad, Pastor Michael Skoor, was sentenced to 29 years in a California state prison. He was convicted of 20+ counts of child sexual abuse."¹¹³

Rebekah: Every two years my entire life we went to the same beach. We did the same thing every year. Everything was ritualized: what we ate, where we went, the family photo we took. We'd walk out in front of that same sign and all assemble in the same way. For 35 years.

¹¹³ See the San Diego Union Tribune:

http://legacy.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/metro/20020813-9999_1m13skoor.html

ABC 10 News: <http://www.10news.com/news/pastor-admits-to-molesting-boys>

It was Easter, and my mom called and she was crying and she told us something really bad had happened. It started out as this hypothetical thing and then it turned out that he told his bishop, he told his therapist, he told my mom, and he confessed.

And then the next thing we know he was moving across the country to Atlanta and going into this sex offender rehabilitation program. It all just felt really unbelievable.

It was right after the Boston priest trials¹¹⁴, where Catholic priests had been indicted for molesting altar boys. It became clear that Dad was going to be the first religious figure on the West Coast that was going to be prosecuted.

The prosecution interviewed over 150 people from all of my dad's congregations over the last 20 years. Someone came and confiscated all of our childhood videos. It was a really scary time.

What I really remember of that time is this big witch-hunt of trying to find more boys. If there were more boys there would be a stronger case for a life sentence. Ultimately, they weren't able to find more than one. It was just this one.

Chase: People ask, you know, how did you start talking about this? And I say, 'Within a month of our dating, I started dealing with the sexual violence in my life and Bekah's dad went to jail for child sexual abuse.'

Rebekah: You had begun telling the story about what had happened in your life, and I had begun to offer these things that were going on currently in mine.

Chase: The only thing I remember from that conversation is you said, 'It was only a shower.' And my response to you was, 'Then in my case, it was only a massage.'

One of the most striking memories I have of this fractured feeling is at his sentencing, at some point his lawyer said, 'Can everyone in the room who's here for Michael Skoor please stand up', and three quarters of the room stood up. And I stood up, because I was standing up for you, because I loved you, and I stared at the mom of the boy who was also in the room.

Rebekah: In the room!

Chase: And I just, like, imagined, what would it feel like to be that mom, who's defending her son, who's a boy, and to feel three quarters of the room endorse this man's character. And it stuck with me in part, too, because I was one of those people standing. I've never made total sense of that instinct, to stand.

¹¹⁴ Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexual_abuse_scandal_in_the_Catholic_archdiocese_of_Boston and *Boston Globe*: <http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/2015/11/03/read-the-first-globe-article-that-helped-expose-the-catholic-church-scandal/RecFSBJy48HWdPbD6iHxYK/story.html>

Rebekah: In looking around the room, and looking at the faces of people who were there to support that family, I felt similarly torn thinking, like, I also am here to support your family. And many of them were wearing sexual survivorship ribbons. It felt very divided: the room with the people with the ribbons, who were there for the kid, and the people without the ribbons, who were there for my dad. And I really felt this profound sense of, 'But I also want a ribbon. I'm not pro- sexual violence; I'm not endorsing my father's actions. He's saying he's guilty.'

Part of me wants to know, 'Do you have desire for adolescent boys, is that something you feel?' But then there's part of me that's like, 'I actually don't want to know that'. I didn't pick my queerness, like, what if you don't pick your attraction to boy? And I wonder if my orientation was truly oriented towards adolescent boy, like, how hard that would be in life.

It's hard to love someone who has done terrible things, but the terrible things don't undo the love; to still crave connection, to still want him to participate in my life, to still love him.

I don't feel like there's a lot of room in the world to have that conversation.

Chase: And are you worried that this movie is failing to do that?

Rebekah: Yes. Maybe.

CREDITS

PUBLIC EXHIBITION and DIGITAL MEDIA

Additional Clips to air on CBC:

Michael: https://www.dropbox.com/s/87dlwnty5yyupe1/BYAM_031716_MICHAEL_FINISHED.mov?dl=0

Rebekah: https://www.dropbox.com/s/pab770idse6ruhX/BYAM_032116_BEKAH_FINISHED.mov?dl=0

In December 2015, CBC acquired *BYAM* for online release as a part of their new Digital Doc Series. As a result, I was given opportunity to conceptualize the project beyond the single screen. *BYAM* will be presented in three parts online. The main 10-minute cut will be accompanied by two featurettes, which provide further detail and context behind the project's making. The first featurette contains a recorded telephone conversation between Michael and me speaking about the logistics of the project. Audiences learn of the construction of the story, and gain tangible connection to Michael's voice and life beyond the narrative of the film. The second

featurette provides more context about Michael’s trial, and specifics of my relationship with Rebekah. An unspoken understanding embedded within the 10 minute piece is the knowledge that I am trans, a life detail which sharply informs Rebekah and my queer-coming-of-age as two female identified people. Conversation contained in the featurette outs our history, and troubles the potentially assumed heteronormativity of our connection, or simplicity of our exchange.

Research about online video viewing patterns is expansive.¹¹⁵ Scholars of digital media, new technologies, cinema and the Internet propose dramatic shifts in audience reception, and credit the immediacy and interactivity of online platforms for expanding audience potentials. A known critique of interactive storytelling models is the often unedited and therefore cumbersome viewing experience, wherein viewers are left to navigate digital worlds without map or guide. The two segments that sit *BYAM*-adjacent are curated, contained, and informed vignettes that I hope will increase capacities for cross-pollinated engagement with prison abolition and queer theory in areas of high traffic online engagement through CBC. Understanding the haphazard, and at times accidental, viewing patterns of people on the Internet – especially on large national platforms such as CBC – I designed each segment hoping to encourage further viewing of the principal material, leaving many questions unanswered, and hopefully complicating the narrative through these episodic connections.

FURTHER THEORETICAL INTEGRATION

Now more than 30 years old, Gayle Rubin’s 1984 essay “Thinking Sex” remains a formative thinking through of value systems attributed to sexuality and groups, which create categories of good vs. bad in the political imaginary. Beginning with an interrogation of the late 19th century panic attributed to masturbation, moving through the “Save the Children” panic of

¹¹⁵ <https://contently.com/strategist/2015/07/06/the-explosive-growth-of-online-video-in-5-charts/>

pedophilia in the 1970s and the moral panics surrounding AIDS/HIV in the 1980s,¹¹⁶ Rubin's work highlights the ways in which certain categories of people have been scapegoated for political agendas. As reflected in histories of moving-image creation explored in this dissertation, trans people have long been scapegoated, and positioned as representative of moral and sexual decay. Only through artistic and activist engagement has the social and political conceptualization of trans people started to change.

My engagement with Michael should not be interpreted as an attempt to absolve him from responsibility, as I do believe he is culpable of his admitted actions. That said, the moral panic, and related treatment of sex offenders in North America, directly reflects homophobic ideologies deeply rooted in sex negativity, which, as Rubin theorizes, create a hierarchy of values and social systems. Michael is in jail for 29 years, to teach the broader public a lesson.

Returning to trans studies and the charge made by theorists to productively dislodge 'trans-' from '-gender', *BYAM* is an experiment in theoretical execution and overlap. How might the construction of moral panics impact and create alliances across representations of marginalized subjects? What can we learn from Rubin's articulation of a hierarchy of values and related political neglects? Here, Rubin and prison abolition activists are in dialogue, asking similar questions about the treatment of sexualized subjects by governing bodies, and calling for vital and life-saving alternatives. If 'trans studies' can be defined as an orientation to knowledge, untethered from the bodies of trans people, then we might find complicated alliances in these new ways of thinking.

¹¹⁶ Published in 1984, Rubin was remarking upon the crisis in peak momentum, in part, on account of government neglect, and restrictions from pharmaceutical companies.

IMPLICATIONS

At the time of this writing, Jared Fogle – the spokesperson for Subway who was made famous after losing incredible amounts of weight eating sandwiches – was just convicted of child sexual abuse and sentenced to 15.5 years in prison.¹¹⁷ I first encountered information about Fogle’s case while sitting in a hotel lobby after presenting my paper about *Akin* with Dr. Hannah Dyer at UC Berkeley. Because we were in public, the program was closed-captioned. In ten minutes of screen reading, I learned that Fogle had long been under investigation for soliciting sex with minors. In addition, television personality Dr. Phil had leaked audio recordings that revealed Fogle to be

negotiating a threesome with a sex worker and potential child. The sex worker was an investigator, and Fogle’s secrets have since been revealed.



Writings about Fogle’s case frame him as struggling with addiction: what was once an addiction to over-eating re-manifest as trouble with alcohol and sex. Fogle’s case has had me up late at night thinking. I think about his admission of guilt about 14 separate minors, when positioned alongside Michael’s admission of guilt about 1. I think about his conviction of 15 years when racked against Michael’s 29. My prison abolitionist motivations insist and believe that prison is not the place in which rehabilitation is possible for either of these men, and yet I

¹¹⁷ See Chris Isidore writing for *CNN*: <http://money.cnn.com/2015/11/19/news/companies/jared-fogle-jail-sentence/>

am angered at the grossly negligent and seemingly arbitrary nature of these convictions. Michael gets 29, and Jared gets 15?

I am reminded of a story that Michael told Rebekah and me on the afternoon of our visit to prison: the man sitting next to us was sentenced to 9 years for sexually abusing an infant. Rebekah and I talk about that moment on camera, but I don't include the conversation in the film as the unintentionally reductive moral of the story is: "Our line is drawn here." *BYAM* is a meditation on these irresolvable tensions. What would it mean if I had spent more time in the film on the specific details of Michael's offenses? Would the details help us to understand him better? Are we able to assert that, when given those details, prison is still not the place for him? Hours after our visit that day Rebekah mentioned, "In the 13 years I have been visiting him in prison, I've never heard him tell the story of what happened in the way that he told you today." Does new audience impact and shape ones access to memory? Does time spent alone thinking inspire new detail? Is his story of self being re-written? I think the answer to all of those questions is yes. For every attempt to clarify my position to the subject matter, my feelings, and my complicated loyalties to Michael and his family, are met by my shifting internal, emotional and political landscapes. The trappings of documentary production enable these tensions to breathe. Post-production conversations with my composer Becky Gebhardt further illuminated my orientations. I said, "the goal is to create a sonic environment where complicated conversations and irresolvable feelings can sit." While talking about similar ambitions with my editor Brooke Sebold, I suggested "perhaps if we make it beautiful enough, people will stay with us for 15 minutes." But of course, I want people to stay with us for much longer than 15 minutes, as does Michael, when the prison phone system continues the countdown of his connection: "you have 30 seconds remaining."

CONCLUSION

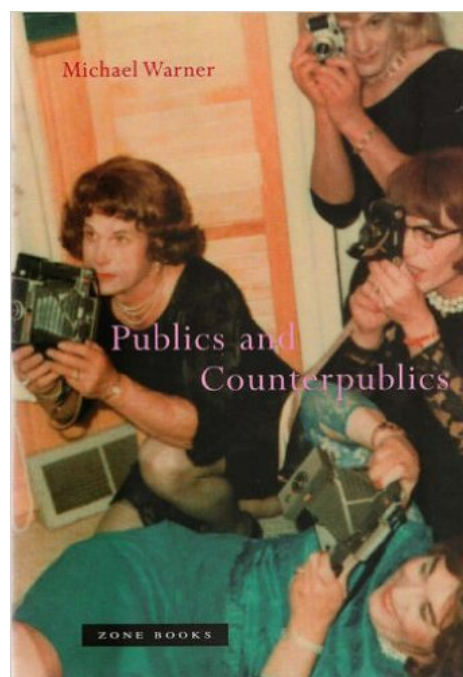
In March 2016, the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) opened its largest survey of North American photography in an exhibition called “Outsiders.”¹¹⁸ Fittingly, the show features artists of colour, queer people, and photographers working outside of – and often against – the industrial mainstream. In addition to photographs by Diane Arbus, Gordon Parks, and moving-image works of Kenneth Anger and Shirley Clarke, a large collection of snapshots from Casa Susanna are on display. Casa Susanna was a vacation hideaway for transvestites and cross-dressers, located in upstate New York in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The Susanna collection re-emerged – or perhaps simply emerged – in public when a collection of photographs was found at a Manhattan flea market by Michel Hurst and Robert Swope in the early 2000s, and then published into a book (2005). In the book’s introduction, Swope contends, “I believe these are ‘witness’ pictures.” He continues, “a way of validating identity.”

As a witness to the collection, spectators might surmise that these photos were taken by Susanna residents, for Susanna residents, in celebration of their shared expressive freedom. But what else might we make of these images, now that they are presented in a glass gallery cage? Alongside the collection, AGO curators offer a “where are they now” series of informative panels about various featured people and cross-dressed identities. Understanding the political climate of and for gender transgression in the 1950-60s, we are left to wonder about the ethics of these historically excavations. Must we – or how might we – account for people’s assumedly desired anonymity?¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Art Gallery of Ontario: <http://www.ago.net/outside>

¹¹⁹ These questions are taken up further by Ms. Bob Davis in "Using Archives to Identify the Trans* Women of Casa Susanna." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2015): 621-634.

At the height of Casa Susanna's hosting, house matriarch – and house photographer – Susanna Valenti also authored essays for *Transvestia*, a zine published in the 1960-80s that connected trans, cross-dressing and gender non-conforming communities. *Transvestia* was responsible for first publishing early photos from the Susanna collection, a way of linking those who might be interested in joining the community.



The cover of Michael Warner's book *Publics and Counterpublics* boasts one such picture, now re-visited in the AGO's exhibition. According to scholars of the public sphere, counterpublics must always remain in tension, and therefore in contact, with the larger public, and Warner's choice signals a knowing crossing of these boundaries. As such, the Casa Susanna collection at the AGO joins many case studies in this project as an example of image-based counterpublic discourse about gender non-conforming subjects that strategically collides with the mainstream. Yet, the inclusion of the Casa Susanna exhibit at the AGO also reflects the sanitization of once radical and subversive content that has now become legible and packaged for mainstream consumption, and ultimate erasure. The presence of Laverne Cox on the cover of TIME magazine does indeed indicate a visibility of trans(itioning) subjects in the mainstream,

but by no means does it confirm a “tipping point” toward social and political progress for trans people.¹²⁰

I began thinking about the content of this dissertation prior to the certifiable explosion of attention to trans(itioning) subjects in the North American mainstream. Writing this now has required revised attention to the formation and management of trans(itioning) subjects by moving-image media, and has further reinforced the need for alternative, experimental, and independent histories. The Cultural Industrial Complex¹²¹ – a near cousin of the Prison and Medical Industrial Complexes – is commodifying, appropriating and monetizing narratives of trans(itioning) subjects in the mainstream at a rapid pace, yet waves of resistance and aesthetic reaction still flourish.

In the weeks leading up to the submission of this project, I was introduced to the work of Wayne Wapeemukwa, a Métis filmmaker from Vancouver, British Columbia. His online bio reads: “Inspired by a radical hope for a more equal and sovereign future, Wayne aspires to keep filming stories and volatilizing desire.”¹²² His latest film, *Balmoral Hotel* (2014), features Angel Gates, a First Nations sex worker, as she dances through Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Wearing a sweater adorned with black feathers, we watch Gates take flight, moving through, with, and alongside the drugs, alcohol, and homelessness that overwhelm her shared community. For Wapeemukwa and Gates, dance functions not only as a metaphor, but also as a mode of necessary political and aesthetic resistance.

The film is structured in three parts by sound. We begin on the street, listening to chatter and the familiar hum of downtown traffic. As the street noise fades, we are ushered into a

¹²⁰ See Samantha Michaels writing for *Mother Jones*: <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/04/north-carolina-lgbt-bathrooms-hb2-enforcement>

¹²¹ Thanks to John Greyson for this apt description of phenomenon.

¹²² Link to view: <https://www.cinemapolitica.org/artists/wapeemukwa-wayne>

symphonic soundscape resonant of emotional blockbusters, and watch as Gates struggles and dances her way through people-filled, dusk-lit streets. With a motion that looks much like one attempting to avoid a swarm of bees in their face, we shift in tone. Wapeemukwa fades out the sound, Gates releases her physical struggle, and we begin to journey the street again. This time, Gates' dance is less protected, more pained, defiant and uncompromising. The score swings into sounds of indigenous solidarity and protest. Gates struggles with her body, her dress, and her surroundings as she vacillates between celebration and fear. People on the street stop to watch her, but no one intervenes. As viewers, we are invited to look *at* Gates, and *with* Gates, a process that begs the question: Who are *we* in the process of this story's making?



The third segment of *Balmoral Hotel* sonically returns Gates to her agitated surroundings as she crosses the road toward a new, less-congested part of town. The music reverts to the original symphonic landscape. She removes her feathered sweater; a shedding of metaphoric and perhaps stereotyped indigenous skin. She passes by a sign outside a bar that reads “No exceptions,” and enters to order a drink. We are reminded again of Maria Yellow Horse Brave

Heart's historic trauma response (2011), and the intersectional, institutional and systemic forces that continue to impact the health and safety of indigenous people. We are reminded that we may not be able to leave our surroundings, but that we can transform our capacities to thrive within them. Wapeemukwa's conclusion is not a gesture of resignation, but rather, a devastating, redemptive, and urgent example of aesthetics as defiance and opposition. Here, I join Wapeemukwa and Gates in their collective pursuit of a radical aesthetic rebellion, and align with their commitments to volatize desire toward a radically changing, trans(itioning) future.

TRANSITIONING PUBLICS imagines new narrative possibilities for trans(itioning) subjects in moving-image media beyond – and often in spite of – the mainstream, through critical engagement with experimental, independent, self and community funded modes of cultural production. I have employed a hybrid methodology that utilizes practice-based, conversational, and experimental approaches to research in an attempt to open up new spaces for creative inquiry. The investigation of shared theoretical models through the construction of *Between You and Me* proposes extensions to trans studies beyond the confines of trans(itioning) identities, and joins historical legacies of trans(itioning) people pushing disciplinary boundaries both within and outside the academy.

The formal and theoretical spark for this project ignited long before I started writing. I was reading James Baldwin's *The Devil Finds Work: An Essay* (1976), a project that meticulously interrogates impacts of race and racism through personal, affective, and political encounters with cinema. Reading Baldwin reminded me of the first time I encountered alternative, experimental and independent histories of trans(itioning) people. Kate Bornstein was on tour with her most recent book, and an invited speaker in my Queer Performance class at UCLA. On that day, I witnessed the power of art and performance as a critical tool of public

teaching. Kate's hybrid work invited conversation and inquiry about under theorized identities and ways of being that shifted my perspective, and my relationship to art in the academy. On that day, Kate inspired imagination about a future for gender non-conforming people that could be public, expansive, responsive, and interdisciplinary, and I endeavor to pay that energy and attention forward indefinitely.

AFTERWORD
A Manifesto for Future Hybrid Learning¹²³

This project endeavours to:

- Treat trans(itioning) subjects as forms of representable subjectivity that remain untethered from intelligible transition narratives that propose stable beginnings or conclusions.
- Mobilize trans(itioning) subjects as objects and optics used to consider the logics of artistic intervention into identity debates.
- Suggest that the space of transition(ing) offers moments of political and temporal suspension.
- Treat trans(itioning) as a visual technology.
- Propose trans(itioning) as a moment of representational hypothesis.
- Highlight moving image as a performance of failure to grasp coherent histories of subjects and/or memory.
- Reveal the failure of gender in the projects of both technological representation and the body.
- Assist in the detangling of trans people from trans theory.

**Just as film studies has moved beyond film,
so too will trans studies move beyond trans people.**

¹²³ Manifestos have long contributed to feminist histories and feminist learning. Often strategically outside the frame and boundaries of traditional scholarship and publishing, manifestos allow for statements and accusations rooted by and through personal opinion and provocation to be guideposts for future learning.

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- About Ray* (2015) dir. Gaby Dellal
- After Stonewall* (1999) dir. John Scagliotti
- Against a Trans Narrative* (2008) dir. Jules Rosskam
- Akin* (2012) dir. Chase Joynt
- Balmoral Hotel* (2014) dir. Wayne Wapeemukwa
- Becoming Chaz* (2011) dir. Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato
- Born in Flames* (1983) dir. Lizzie Borden
- Bowling for Columbine* (2002) dir. Michael Moore
- Boy I Am* (2006) dir. Sam Feder and Julie Hollar
- Boyhood* (2014) dir. Richard Linklater
- Boys Don't Cry* (1999) dir. Kimberly Peirce
- Brave New Girls* (TV Series 2014-) Multiple directors
- By Hook or By Crook* (2001) dir. Silas Howard and Harry Dodge
- Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) dir. Blake Edwards
- BROTHERS* (2015-) dir. Emmett Lundberg
- Capturing the Friedmans* (2003) dir. Andrew Jarecki
- Criminal Queers* (2013) dir. Chris Vargas and Eric A. Stanley
- Coming Out* (1989) dir. Heiner Carow
- Cruel and Unusual* (2006) dir. Janet Baus, Dan Hunt and Reid Williams
- Dallas Buyer's Club* (2013) dir. Jean-Marc Vallée
- Dancing with the Stars* (2005-) Multiple directors

Dangerous Lives: Coming Out in the Developing World (2003) dir. John Scagliotti

Dirty Sexy Money (TV Series 2007–2009) Multiple directors

Dyketactics (1974) dir. Barbara Hammer

Edward II (1991) dir. Derek Jarman

Extraordinary Pregnancies (2010) dir. Chris Vargas

Falling in Love... with Chris and Greg (2010) dir. Chris Vargas and Greg Youmans

Feeling Reserved: Alexis' Story (2011) dir. Jess Mac

Free CeCe (2016) dir. Jacqueline Gares

Grizzly Man (2005) dir. Werner Herzog

Happy Birthday, Marsha! (2016) dir. Reina Gossett and Sasha Wortzel

Her Story (2015) dir. Sydney Freeland

Here Comes Honey Boo Boo (TV Series 2012-2014) Multiple directors

Holiday Heart (2000) dir. Robert Townsend

Homotopia (2006) dir. Chris Vargas and Eric A. Stanley

I Am Cait (TV Mini-Series 2015) Multiple directors

I Am Jazz (TV Series 2015-) Multiple directors

I Am My Own Woman (1992) dir. Rosa Von Praunheim

Jack Smith and the Destruction of Atlantis (2006) dir. Mary Jordan

Just One of the Guys (1985) dir. Lisa Gottlieb

Kate Bornstein is a Queer and Pleasant Danger (2014) dir. Sam Feder

Lesbian Avengers Eat Fire Too (1993) dir. Janet Baus and Su Friedrich

Looking for Langston (1989) dir. Isaac Julien

MAJOR! (2016) dir. StormMiguel Florez and Annalise Ophelian

Mark (2009) dir. Mike Hoolboom

Married With Children (TV Series 1987-1997) Multiple directors

Middle Sexes: Redefining He and She (2005) dir. Antony Thomas

MOTHA Executive Director Videos (2014) dir. Chris Vargas

Mr. Angel (2013) dir. Dan Hunt

My Mother's Place (1990) dir. Richard Fung

Nanook of the North (1922) Robert J. Flaherty

Orange is the New Black (2013-) Multiple directors

Poison (1991) dir. Todd Haynes

Prison Abolition + Prefiguring the World You Want To Live In (2013) dir. Dean Spade

Psycho (1960) dir. Alfred Hitchcock

Roseanne (TV Series 1988-1997) Multiple directors

Ruby (2010) dir. Elisha Lim

RuPaul's Drag Race (TV Series 2009–) Multiple directors

Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton's Cafeteria (2005) dir. Susan Stryker

Semiotics of the Kitchen (1975) dir. Martha Rosler

Sense8 (2014-) dir. Lana and Lily Wachowski

She's a Boy I Knew (2007) dir. Gwen Haworth

Silence of the Lambs (1991) dir. Jonathan Demme

Small Town Security (TV Series 2012-2014) Multiple directors

Southern Comfort (2001) dir. Kate Davis

Tangerine (2013) dir. Sean Baker

Tarnation (2003) dir. Jonathan Caouette

The Act of Killing (2012) dir. Joshua Oppenheimer

The Aggressives (2005) dir. Daniel Peddle

The Ballad of Roy and Silo (2011) dir. John Greyson

The Brandon Teena Story (1998) dir. Susan Muska and Gréta Ólafsdóttir

The Crying Game (1992) dir. Neil Jordan

The Danish Girl (2015) dir. Tom Hooper

The Hawker (2012) dir. Coco Riot and Elisha Lim

The Living End (1992) dir. Gregg Araki

The Sinking of Lusitania (1918) dir. Winsor McCay

The Wanted 18 (2014) dir. Amer Showali and Paul Cowan

The Watermelon Woman (1996) dir. Cheryl Dunye

To Wong Foo Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar (1995) dir. Beeban Kidron

Toilet Training (2004) dir. Tara Mateik

Tongues Untied (1989) dir. Marlon Riggs

Transforming Family (2012) dir. Rémy Huberdeau

Transgeneration (2005) Multiple directors

Transparent (TV Series 2014-) Multiple directors

True Trans (2014-) Multiple directors

Two Spirits: Sexuality, Gender and the Murder of Fred Martinez (2009) dir. Lydia Nibley

Waves (2013) dir. Ahmed Nour

Waltz with Bashir (2008) dir. Ari Folman

Work of Art! Reality TV Special (2012) dir. Chris Vargas and Greg Youmans

Zero Patience (1993) dir. John Greyson