

**THE SPACES BETWEEN: NON-BINARY REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER
IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN FILM**

by

Wendy Sue Pawlak

Copyright © Wendy Sue Pawlak 2012

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In the Graduate College

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

2012

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
GRADUATE COLLEGE

As members of the Dissertation Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation
prepared by Wendy Pawlak

entitled The Spaces Between: Non-Binary Representations of Gender in Twentieth-
Century American Film

and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

_____ Date: 4/11/2012
Lynda Zwinger

_____ Date: 4/11/2012
Susan White

_____ Date: 4/11/2012
Adela Licona

Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon the candidate's
submission of the final copies of the dissertation to the Graduate College.

I hereby certify that I have read this dissertation prepared under my direction and
recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement.

_____ Date: 4/11/2012
Dissertation Director: Lynda Zwinger

STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

This dissertation has been submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for an advanced degree at the University of Arizona and is deposited in the University Library to be made available to borrowers under rules of the Library.

Brief quotations from this dissertation are allowable without special permission, provided that accurate acknowledgment of source is made. Requests for permission for extended quotation from or reproduction of this manuscript in whole or in part may be granted by the copyright holder.

SIGNED: Wendy Sue Pawlak

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation would not exist without the outstanding support of my committee members; my director, Lynda Zwinger, who graciously stepped in at the eleventh hour to rescue this project from oblivion; Adela Licon, who provided me with extensive and immensely helpful feedback on my drafted chapters, and Susan White, whose knowledge of film theory has proved invaluable.

I would also like to thank Dr. Daniel Silvermint, my very unofficial dissertation cheerleader/advisor/mentor extraordinaire, who generously spent hours helping me untangle the very complex theoretical issues addressed in this project; I may never have finished without your assistance and general moral support.

I wouldn't have made it this far without my parents, Nick and Cynthia Skiver, for their ceaseless faith and support. You're the only ones who've been with me for the entire journey and are aware of the (many, MANY) obstacles along the way.

To my friend, partner, companion, and lifemate, Bennett Burke, your endless patience, emotional stability, and humor have been an invaluable counterpart to my lack of all three of those things; I apologize for the last three years of insanity, and I promise to no longer be driven batty by the dissertation yet to be written.

I thank my wonderful community of friends for the various kinds of support they have offered me in the past year, from reassuring hugs and snuggles, to provision of quality adult beverages, to many hours of satisfyingly distracting video games, to occasionally combative bouts of intellectual debate at Tucson's various Starbucks locations. Thank you to Jason Brown, Ruthann Coyote, Deborah Hotep, Johanna Lewis, Susan Mann, Spencer McCleave, Katy McDowell, Lesa Mitchell, Tom Moore, Dave Parker, Vecordae Rodriguez, Stacy Scheff, Sandy Schwoebel, Gregory Stoltz, and Chad Van Schoelandt. You are each awesome and saintly; I love you all.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation first to Kate Bornstein, who said in 1994 that “virtually all the books and theories about gender and transsexuality to date have been written by non-transsexuals who, no matter how well-intentioned, are each trying to figure out how to make us fit into *their* world view” (63). As one such non-transsexual, when I began work on this project, I was doing just that, seeing gender only through my own lens and frustrated when actual transgendered people, both in film and in life, failed to become visible through it. While I still make no lofty claims of universal understanding of all gender identities and people’s lived experiences of them, it is my hope that this completed project comes closer to my goal of seeing, accepting, and celebrating transgendered people not on my terms, but on theirs.

Secondly, I dedicate this work to all the people for whom the essentialist and limiting terms “man” and “woman” simply don’t fit, who have been victims of prejudice, discrimination, and even horrific violence as a result. Gender is not a fixed, stable, and concrete “something” for everyone, and this dissertation is my attempt to acknowledge and embrace that fact.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	8
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY.....	10
1.1. Preface	10
1.2. Methodology	20
1.3. Gender and Transgender: A Positive Account	28
1.4. No More Checkboxes! Transgender Theory & Abolition of the Gender Binary	41
1.5. Conclusion	53
CHAPTER TWO: QUEERNESS AT THE THEATER: FEMINIST, QUEER, AND TRANSGENDER	
THEORIES OF FILM	55
2.1. How to Read A Film?	55
2.2. Feminist Film Theory: Representation and Erasure	56
2.3. Transgender Displacement and Denial	61
2.4. Making Film ‘Perfectly Queer’: Textuality and Reception Theory	71
2.5. Queer Moments: New Queer Cinema & Transgender in Film	75
2.6. ‘The Sex That Is Both’: Gender-Mixing and Erotic Fascination	79
2.7. Transgender Theory & Film: An Under-examined Relationship	85
2.8. Conclusion	92
CHAPTER THREE: FOLLOWING A SCRIPT: TRANSSEXUALITY AND BINARY GENDER	95
3.1. Introduction: Don’t You Find It Odd That Plastic Surgery Can Cure A Mental Disorder?	95
3.2. The ‘New’ New Queer Cinema: Openness and Acceptance, Playing with the Notions of Male and Female	98
3.3. <i>Transamerica</i> (2005): “My Body May Be a Work in Progress, But There is Nothing Wrong with My Soul”	101
3.3-a. Run over at the intersection of crossing and passing	101
3.3-b. Queerer than it seems at first? Equating gender and race	104
3.3-c. Communities of (only) two: lack of acceptance	113
3.3-d. Playing it just for laughs	119

TABLE OF CONTENTS - *Continued*

3.4. <i>Normal</i> (2003): “What We Do for Love”	121
3.4-a. Creating a conversation: city girl meets country boy/(girl)	121
3.4-b. Location, location, location: setting and audience reception	123
3.4-c. Positive portrayal: publicly defying gender stereotypes	133
3.4-d. “I think it’s cool”: coming around to acceptance	140
3.5. Conclusion	145
CHAPTER FOUR: <i>IS IT ALL JUST AN ACT? DRAG PERFORMANCE AND GENDER IDENTITY</i>	147
4.1. Introduction: A ‘Different’ Kind of Female Impersonator	147
4.2. <i>To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar</i> (1995): “I Do Not Think of You As A Man, and I Do Not Think of You As A Woman - I Think of You As An Angel”	155
4.2-a. Manly ‘girls’: hypermasculine actors ‘playing’ at drag	155
4.2-b. Gender and sexuality: not the same thing	157
4.2-c. Angels with queer faces: divinity and parody	164
4.3. <i>The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert</i> (1994): “Just What This Country Needs: A Cock in a Frock on a Rock”	182
4.3-a. A question of intention – drag’s relationship to the feminine	182
4.3-b. In the center or at the margins? ‘Locating’ identity in the outback.....	188
4.3-c. Which camp is the best camp? The limitations of camp theorization	194
4.3-d. Queer reception: how queer is <i>Priscilla</i> , really?	198
4.4. Conclusion	203
CONCLUSION.....	205
WORKS CITED	211

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the intersections among discourses of feminism, transgender studies, queer theory, film studies, and social activist practice. I address the question of how transphobia as a set of beliefs and behaviors is illustrated in four late-twentieth-century films, three produced in America and one originally released in Australia but later acquiring a significant following in this country. I define transphobia as the “fear of a transgendered person and the hatred, discrimination, intolerance, and prejudice that this fear brings” (Laframboise 2002) and transgender as a broad term that can apply to persons, behaviors, and filmic images, a “self-conscious politicization of identity that activates an investigation of gender relations within different s socio-spatial regimes” (Brooks 1) and “clearly disrupt[s] hegemonic notions of a stable trinity between sex, gender and sexuality” (Jennings and Lomine 146).

I provide brief histories of feminist and queer theories to illustrate these fields’ insufficiency in accounting for transgender experience and trace the establishment of transgender studies as an explicit field of study. Then, I examine works by transgender studies theorists and activists to explain the progression of thought that led to these writers’ call for abolition of the binary gender system. In the following chapter, I trace the theoretical moves from a feminist theory of film to a queer theory approach to film, again pointing out the limited perspective that explicitly feminist analysis of film has frequently offered.

Finally, I demonstrate the ways in which each film conforms to and/or defies heteronormative ideals of gender and sexuality and upholds the binary gender system. I suggest that ongoing efforts in transgender and other kinds of social activism might eventually bring about a postgenderist society wherein gender “roles” are no longer forced upon individuals, but may be adopted (or refused) by choice. To this end, I outline six criteria of what I term a positive film portrayal of transgender and explain how each film either meets or fails to meet these criteria, which generally focus on the degree to which the films allow their protagonists to maintain a gender identity that violates binary norms on a continual basis.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

1.1. Preface

I will say this as bluntly as I know how: I am a transsexual, and therefore I am a monster...Maybe there really is no place for me in all creation. I'm so tired of this ceaseless movement. I do war with nature. I am alienated from Being. I'm a self-mutilated deformity, a pervert, a mutant, trapped in monstrous flesh. (Stryker 2006b: 246-51)

The equating of transgender¹ identity with monstrosity has long pervaded the popular culture lexicon: American films in the latter half of the twentieth century such as *Psycho* (1960), *Dressed to Kill* (1980), and *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), for example, have depicted transgendered people as deviant, murdering sociopaths. These narratives suggest not only that a non-conforming gender identity *indicates* some level of pathology, but that this identity *causes* violent or destructive behaviors, an association that upholds and even creates the fear-and-loathing response to transgendered people cultivated by the privileged social classes. Ironically, though, any cursory investigation of crime statistics for virtually any year will show that *real* transgendered people are more likely to be the *victims* of violence than its perpetrators.²

¹ This term has such a complex etymology that I shall devote an entire section later in this chapter to explaining how this dissertation uses it. For now, I shall very briefly define transgender as a “self-conscious politicization of identity that activates an investigation of gender relations within different socio-spatial regimes” (Brooks 1) and “clearly disrupt[s] hegemonic notions of a stable trinity between sex, gender and sexuality” (Jennings and Lomine 146). In other words, transgender as a term can be descriptive of both individual identities and filmic images, provided that these identities or images transgress this “trinity” and present non-normative connections between biological sex, social gender, and sexual behavior.

² A 2009 collaborative study by the NGO Transgender Europe (TGEU) and the online journal “Liminalis: a Journal for Sex/Gender Emancipation and Resistance,” describes 121 cases of reported murdered trans people in 2008 worldwide. From January 2009 to June 2009 already 83 cases of murdered trans people have been reported worldwide...the number of reports of murdered trans people is increasing ... Since the beginning of 2008

Even when film depicts them as non-criminals and non-sociopaths, it has repeatedly suggested some measure of essential “difference” between transgendered and non-transgendered people, alternately casting transgendered characters as literally alien (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975)), sympathetic but still ultimately “Othered” victims of fate (*Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001)), or farcical caricatures whose comedic appeal stems from their participation in some degree of cross-dressing or drag performance (*Tootsie* (1982), *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993)).

This study examines the nature of transphobia in a number of recent American films, broadly defining the term as “the fear of a transgendered person and the hatred, discrimination, intolerance, and prejudice that this fear brings” (Laframboise 2002).³ Employing the lenses of feminist, queer, transgender, and film theories, I will highlight the current body of work that proposes not merely an increased tolerance of transgender presentation, but an abolition of the binary gender system altogether. I see these two objectives as related projects because I perceive the erasure of transphobia as *contingent* upon completion of what Sally Haslanger terms the “work to undermine those forces that

the murder of a trans person is reported every third day, on average...The majority of cases have been reported from Latin America and North America...On these continents the majority of cases have been reported from Brazil (59) and the U.S.A. (16) for 2008. (Balzer 2009, italics added)

Of further interest here is the fact that entering the search terms “violent crimes committed by transgender people” (and several variations thereof) in *several* research databases returned *no results*.

³ I must note that like many other terms employed in this dissertation, transphobia has been assigned a wide variety of definitions that focus on different aspects of the interactions between transgendered and non-transgendered people. It is not my goal here to critique the relative merits of these definitions, but to emphasize the tendency they generally share to highlight the hierarchical ideology privileging non-transgendered identities over transgendered or gender-non-conforming ones. For a more comprehensive examination of the “words and deeds” that comprise transphobia, see Lisa Harney, “Transphobic Words and Deeds,” *Questioning Transphobia* (N.p. 24 August 2008), 10 February 2012.

make being a man, a woman...possible; we should refuse to be gendered man *or* woman” (165, emphasis added). It may seem feasible that simply expanding the definitions of the “man” and “woman” gender models would solve the problem entirely; individuals could then adopt one of the two gender labels, and their choices would be honored by the individuals and institutions with which they interacted. However, the man/woman binary is often *itself* restrictive and confining and simply *does not fit* many individuals’ self-perceptions; as I shall demonstrate, many real people describe themselves as neither man *nor* woman and have adopted one or more of a myriad of other identities.⁴ Therefore, I offer the possibility of rejecting man/woman labels altogether (or at least the ideology of subordination underlying their current dominant usage) and devising a framework that is both non-hierarchical and cognizant of the inevitable occurrences of difference across a society composed of individual members.

I will examine four 20th-century American film representations of gender transgression and the degree to which they reify the binary nature of contemporary gender norms and/or depict gender expressions that occupy the liminal or permanent spaces between these binaries. Films featuring transgendered characters or images inhabit diverse genres in the American film corpus, from comedy to documentary to drama; I will refer briefly to several of these films throughout my project to illustrate important conceptual points about transgender identity and filmic representation. The four films I will discuss in depth depict the transgender subcategories of transsexuality, identified in

⁴ This plurality of identities shall be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter; for now, I merely wish to point out that it exists.

the films *Normal* (2003) and *Transamerica* (2005) as the desire for sexual reassignment surgery (SRS), and drag performance, articulated in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) and *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (1995) by the protagonists' performance of femininity (through clothing, behavior, and affect) that is read by audiences as impersonation, relying on the characters' anatomical male identity for its intelligibility.

Films with transgendered content or themes warrant examination by virtue of their very existence: in an exhaustive search for 20th-century American films depicting central characters who transgress binary gender norms, only a handful have surfaced, most of those appearing in the last two decades.⁵ The vast majority of the films that depict such transgression at *all* do so in a highly particular way: namely, these films attempt, in varying degrees, to force transgender identity to fit within an overarching framework of gender dimorphism⁶ and heteronormativity.⁷

⁵ Obvious exceptions to this generalization exist; the first American film featuring a transgender protagonist, the parodic and satirical *Glen or Glenda?*, appeared in 1953, and 1971's *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde* garnered some attention in its native Britain. However, these films could hardly be called typical of their age, first because they portray transgender characters at all, and second because of their relatively obscure status as low-budget, avant-garde productions. The collapse of the Hollywood studio system in the 1950s and subsequent commercial recession preceding the birth of the blockbuster may have precluded these (and other) individual films from seeping into the wider cultural consciousness, particularly if they were not aggressively marketed or cast with well-known actors. The important consideration here is that, by and large, transgendered people remained invisible and unacknowledged within American film narrative for most of the early 20th century, and films that did portray them were the exception rather than the rule.

⁶ Throughout this dissertation, the terms "dimorphic gender" and "binary gender" shall be used interchangeably, both alluding to the notion that the two-gender system in its basic form allows for only two distinct "forms," assumed in most cases to be physical (visual) presentations.

⁷ The concept of heteronormativity derives from an assumption that human genders and sexualities are organized into hierarchical binaries that privilege certain manifestations (male, heterosexual) over others (female, homosexual). As Michael Warner argues,

Narratives with transsexual protagonists in particular tend to center on these characters' desire to perform *complete* transition from one end of the gender binary to the other and to “pass”⁸ *within* a dimorphic gender system. For purposes of this dissertation, I will define characters as transsexual by the dis-identification⁹ they experience with the gender label attributed to them at birth; Stephen Whittle further defines transsexuals as people who “experience a profound sense of incongruity between ... psychological sex and ... anatomical sex. Transsexual people wish to change the anatomical sex, through hormones or surgery, to match the internal perception of their bodies” (66).

The existence in film of the passing narrative alone may seem ideologically neutral: many real transsexual people actually do want to permanently adopt a new (binary) gender identity and experience conflict resulting from their efforts to pass. However, such a strong narrative focus on these efforts perpetuates oppressive¹⁰ social

[M]uch privilege lies in heterosexual culture's exclusive ability to interpret itself as society. Het culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of intergender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn't exist ... Aristotle grounds *The Politics* in the necessity of male-female union (42), and it is certainly true that Western political thought has taken the heterosexual couple to represent the principle of social union itself. (xxi)

⁸ See Jennifer Reitz, “The Issue of Passing,” *transsexual.org* (n.p., 18 January 2007), 22 February 2012; briefly, “‘Passing’ increases survivability and overall happiness for the transsexual. Passing is composed of a physical side and a behavioral side. Earliest possible use of hormones is the best guarantee of physical passability. Unlearning sex roles and expressing natural, inborn gender behavior is the most important part of successful behavioral passing” (Reitz).

⁹ See José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

¹⁰ To this and future uses of the term “oppression,” I apply Iris Marion Young’s definition of the term as “the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of frequently unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchy and market mechanisms” (93). According to Young, oppression has “five faces,” each with different characteristics, that collectively account for the experience of all oppressed groups; these faces include exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural

conditions in two ways: first, because of the practical impossibilities that often entirely prevent passing. Many such people, those transitioning from male to female like the protagonists in *Normal* and *Transamerica* in particular,¹¹ spend their entire post-transition lives *unable* to pass because of unalterable aspects of their physical appearance or body gestures.¹² Many films' suggestion that passing is the only route to "real" gender creates a continual Sisyphean battle for such individuals: their material bodies prevent them from conforming to binary gender norms, but popular culture, and their peers who internalize the values of that culture, inform them that they must do so or risk external invalidation of their gender identity. This invalidation itself can have dire consequences, ranging from social censure and material detriment to overt violence and even death, raising the stakes of passing even higher for individuals already unable to accomplish it.

imperialism, and violence. When characterizing situations or depictions as oppressive, I shall endeavor to explain which one or more of the five categories is/are most salient to that particular example of oppression.

¹¹ Female-to-male (FTM) transgender people of course experience conflict related to passing as well: see Cromwell (1996, 2006), Green (1999, 2007), Halberstam (1998), Hollibaugh (2000), Rubin (2006), Sullivan (2006), and Whitley (2010) for an extended discussion of this point. Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) may be the best-known recent film example of an FTM narrative; the film is not discussed at length in this dissertation *only* for reasons of concision; it certainly fits within the parameters of my argument. However, the implications of male-to-female (MTF) passing have overall garnered more scholarly attention, led to more violent crimes, and overall achieved more cultural visibility because of the *relative* ease of FTM passing; MTF transition also has overall a much larger representation in contemporary culture.

¹² I shall also incorporate elements of Marjorie Garber's definition of transsexuality, which I find useful in its acknowledgement of transsexuality's intangible (non-physiological/anatomical) elements: "The term 'transsexual' is used to describe persons who are either 'pre-op' or 'post-op' – that is, whether or not they have undergone penectomy, hysterectomy, phallo- or vaginoplasty. Transsexualism is not a surgical product but a social, cultural, and psychological zone" (106). Transsexuality is, as I have said before, certainly not the only manifestation of transgender identity, but it does appear in a large portion of contemporary films that feature transgender and both of the films discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

To relate this dilemma to Young's conception of oppression, the passing narrative is oppressive in its privileging of both cultural imperialism and violence: the two-gender system demonstrates cultural imperialism in that its "dominant meanings render the particular perspectives and point of view of one's own group [in this case, transgendered people] invisible at the same time as they stereotype [that] group and mark it out as the Other" (100). Transgression of this system often incites the violence I mentioned above:

[S]uch violence is systematic because it is directed at any member of the group simply because he or she is a member of that group ... [T]he causes of such violence must be traced to unconscious structures of identity formation which project onto some groups the fluid, bodily aspect of the subject that threatens the rigid unity of that identity" (102).

I will not comment here on the merits of these individuals' desire to maintain the binary gender system by perpetuating its existence; I merely wish to point out the oppressive nature of cultural narratives suggesting passing's absolute necessity to the construction of gender identity.

The second oppressive feature of the passing-focused narrative is its assumption that all people claiming a non-binary gender identity *want* to pass, and consequently, that all such individuals would describe themselves as transsexual, a claim that obviously fails to hold up in real-world transgender communities.¹³ As Kenneth Zucker and Anne Lawrence state, "Data from ... questionnaires show that the frequent wish to be of the

¹³ Numerous studies and articles on the prevalence of transgender or 'gender-variant' identity, subsumed under the larger psychological classification of gender identity disorder (GID) cite the inherent difficulty in accurately quantifying *any* component of the larger spectrum of transgender identity. Because the term itself is applied in such widely disparate ways by both people who claim the identity and those who would apply it to others, no consistent standard exists for deciding who is transgender and who is not, for purposes of empirical studies. Additionally, the persistent stigma around transgender identity may prevent unknown numbers of people from seeking any treatment at all, surgical, hormonal, psychological, or otherwise, thus artificially lowering the incidence rate of transgender identity across the globe.

other sex [transsexualism] is quite low but that periodic cross-gender behavior is more common” (8). Eli Coleman echoes this sentiment in an article from the same issue of the *International Journal of Transgenderism*:

Individuals who undergo surgical sex reassignment are only an extreme end-point of a continuum of cross-gender identification. We are more and more aware of the myriad of individuals who identify as transgender or gender queer and who represent individuals along the broad spectrum of cross-gender identification. (5)

The two-gender system also oppresses gender identities not wholly subsumed within the man/woman binary by marginalizing them in its refusal to even acknowledge them; in Young’s terms, “Marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression. A whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life, potentially then subject to material deprivation and even extermination” (98).

Narratives that center on passing inherently marginalize and alienate those individuals who do not consider their own gender in binary terms. The suggestion in these films that they must “choose one or the other and fit it entirely” tells such people unequivocally that their genderqueer, intersex, bigender, agender, androgyne, or other non-man/non-woman identities are illegitimate, and both film and real-world data illustrate the inability of many transgendered people to “exercise [their] capacities in socially defined and recognized ways” (Young 98), such as obtaining gainful employment or housing or accessing adequate health care. As Riki Wilchins suggests in her reading of Jacques Derrida,

Difference and exclusion are not incidental to language but are integral to how we create meaning. According to Derrida, this reliance on difference

also leads to a tendency to see the world's complexity in terms of simplistic binaries ... Trying to be inclusive won't help when it comes to binaries. For instance, take the ever-popular "spectrum of gender." It's an effort to be more inclusive ... But it's inevitably anchored by the only two real genders – Man and Woman. All those "other genders" are either strung out between them, like laundry drying on the line, or circling around them in orbit, like some kind of errant Sputnik. Because it sets the terms of discussion, the first term of the binary acts as a center that is insulated from being questioned.

Thus we endlessly debate the meaning of Woman but not Man, homosexuality but not heterosexuality, blackness but never whiteness, transgender but never *normal* genders. Binaries are like the black holes of knowledge: Nothing ever gets out. And nothing new can get in. That's why a new nonbinary gender is as impossible to imagine as a new primary color. In the end, binaries are not just a curious way we have of understanding the world. They are political. They are about power. They create hierarchies – male/female, black/white, colonial/native – that produce winners and losers. (41)

Finally, the passing narrative positions transsexual identity in particular as by nature *transitional*, or temporary: once they are able to pass, ostensibly these individuals might be perceived as "no longer transsexual," having completed the process of figuratively "changing spaces" by transitioning from one gender identity to the other.¹⁴ For many transgendered people, eventual compliance with a binary gender system is *not* an end goal; instead, the apparently "in-between" or "neither" aspects of their gender identities are the very features that *constitute* those identities. Individuals who identify as genderqueer or androgyne, for example, view the "man" and "woman" labels as non-

¹⁴ This might explain why both transsexuality and drag performance are perceived as overall less "threatening" than more permanently intermediate gender identities: post-operative transsexuals can be reinscribed within the binary gender system, thus ensuring that system's dominance, and drag is by nature a "temporary" identity space that *relies* upon the audience's knowledge that the performer underneath is "really a man (or woman, in the case of drag king performance)." At the end of the performance, the costumes and make-up are assumed to come *off*, and the performer's participation in the binary gender system re-affirmed.

applicable to their sense of self, and the variety of identities that may be captured within the inclusive category “transgender” continues to expand in contemporary society.

Such representations are all but absent from contemporary films featuring transgendered characters, the overwhelming majority of which depict characters’ attempts to acquire and legitimate a binary form of gender identity. The films adhering mostly closely to the passing narrative formulation virtually prevent transgendered people from existing outside of their gender identity; the perceived (by others) “in-between-ness” of their gender is highly problematized and placed center stage in their character development. The audience is never permitted to forget the message, reiterated ad infinitum, that “*this is a transgendered person,*” which ultimately creates a dichotomy between so-called “normal” and “deviant” gender presentations.

Obviously, just as each individual expression and presentation of gender is unique, each film is also unique.¹⁵ Not every film featuring a transgendered protagonist maintains compulsive adherence to the gender binary, eliminating ambiguity and reaffirming for socially/sexually conservative mainstream U.S. audiences the ideological safety of the heteronormative framework. In fact, a number of films do just the opposite, *forcing* their audiences to confront (often in a visually explicit manner) gender indeterminacy and leaving issues of absolute gender dimorphism ultimately unresolved.¹⁶

¹⁵ I shall return to this point later in the chapter: to claim that every individual presents gender in a manner that is entirely unique from all other individuals may seem to be an overly broad claim. However, I raise the issue here to warn against essentialist conceptions of gender assuming that all persons claiming “man” or “woman,” or even “transgender” or “non-gender-conforming” identities, claim those identities for the same reasons, or manifest those identities in wholly identical ways.

This project will avoid the simple binary categorization of “films that do” and “films that don’t,” however, and discuss them instead as occupying various points on a continuum of obedience to binary gender norms.

1.2. Methodology

As Jane Gallop does in her book *The Daughter’s Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis*,¹⁷ this study presents the “possibility of creating exchanges between the discourses of people who do not speak to each other” (xi). By placing selected pairs of films in conversation with one another, even when they are not considered direct responses to each other, I will illustrate what is similar about the films as well as what is different, with the objective of “set[ting] up what appears to be an opposition between two thinkers or [films], and then to move beyond the belligerence of opposition to an exchange between the [films]” (xi). Gallop suggests that the strength of an analytical endeavor lies in its “capacity for change, flexibility, ability to learn, to be touched and moved by contact with others” (xi). To this end, her project suggests that the fields of feminism and psychoanalysis should be placed in dialogue so that scholars might derive conclusions from the alchemy of the combined methodologies that would be unavailable when examining only one of them: “The radical potential for their marriage is not a mystical fusion obliterating all difference and conflict, but a provocative contact which opens to each what is not encompassed by the limits of its identity” (xii).

¹⁶ In general, the films that do this tend to appear outside the commercial Hollywood complex. Examples that leap immediately to mind include *Paris Is Burning* (1990), *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), and *Normal* (2003).

¹⁷ (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

I apply a similar analytical framework to my comparative readings of films depicting transgender: I shall place the films in dialogue with each other to point out aspects of each film that may not be apparent when examining them separately. Both the mainstream “blockbuster” and the avant-garde, independent films discussed in each chapter “can be seen as efforts to call into question a rigid identity that cramps and binds. But both also tend to want to produce a ‘new identity’, one that will now be adequate and authentic” (xii). Even in attempting to question existing perceptions and definitions of transgender, the films tend to gravitate toward presenting some “new” definition to replace the old, perpetuating the Lacanian idea that “any [‘stably’-defined] identity will necessarily be alien and constraining” (xii).

Like Gallop, I reject the notion that “one” such “adequate and authentic” identity exists and do not seek “some sort of liberation from identity. This would only lead to another form of paralysis – the oceanic passivity of undifferentiation. Identity must be continually assumed and immediately called into question” (xii). Such a statement might seem to suggest the inevitability (and necessity) of endless existential crisis; questioning one’s core identity on a daily basis would surely consume massive psychological energy. However, I believe Gallop makes this point to illustrate the means by which any system of identity norms can become so utterly entrenched. Transgender activist Leslie Feinberg, for example, argues that the gender system in particular has experienced such rigidity thus far because

[a]ll our lives we’ve been taught that sex and gender are synonymous . . . Pink for girls and blue for boys. It’s just “natural,” we’ve been told. But at

the turn of the [twentieth] century in this country, blue was considered a girl's color and pink was a boy's. Simplistic and rigid gender codes are neither eternal nor natural. They are changing social concepts ... [A]ncient communal societies held transgendered people in high esteem. It took a bloody campaign by the emerging ruling classes to declare what had been considered natural to be its opposite. That prejudice, foisted on society by its ruling elite, endures today. (1992: 206)

Ancient societies likely did not hold mass town hall meetings to vote unanimously on what behaviors would be considered acceptable for people of various genders; a gender code was *forced* upon them at the point of a sword, and any attempt to question or contradict this code elicited harsh consequences.

Variations in the desire to perform so-called “cross-gendered behaviors” did not magically vanish overnight; rather, what had once been normal became normal's opposite, and to question the “new normal” was explicitly forbidden. We might argue that human societies have matured somewhat since ancient times, as even dominant gender norms have become significantly more relaxed and at least the *legal* system exacts no punishment against people for defying them (individual ignorant citizens, on the other hand, are another matter). The point here is that, as Feinberg says, “[t]ransgendered people are demanding the right to choose our own self-definition” (206), generally with the assumption that these choices are themselves malleable and subject to eventual revision. The goal of this analysis, then, is not to offer one representation of transgender identity as “right” or “real” and relegate all others to “undesirable” or “inaccurate” status. Rather, I will compare the films to expose the moments when the outer limits of binary identity categories break down and refuse to contain certain manifestations, and how the films offer (or fail to offer) viable alternatives to those binaries.

This study's methodology also borrows from Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet*,¹⁸ which Russo himself describes as "an exploration of gay characters in American film," and explicitly *not* a book about "who in Hollywood [was] lesbian or homosexual [or] how gays and lesbians have expressed themselves in Hollywood" (xi). This distinction seems to have arisen from Russo's realization that in post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS-crisis America (the book's first edition appeared in 1981), openly gay "enterprises" were "still highly suspect in the culture in general...Books on gay subjects and even books on non-gay subjects by openly gay writers have rarely been taken seriously by the straight press – when they are noticed at all" (xii). In other words, even in the aftermath of the 1969 Stonewall Inn uprising in New York City and the gathering momentum of Gay Liberation, homosexuality in America was not deemed a "worthy subject" of academic inquiry, certainly not one to be openly discussed or connected in any overt way to larger political or social justice issues. In an even more explicit statement, Russo explains the direct consequences of this academic taboo for American homosexuals:

There is enormous pressure to keep gay people defined solely by our sexuality, which prevents us from expressing our existence in political terms...the big lie about gays and lesbians is that we do not exist. The story of the ways in which gayness has been defined in American film is the story of the ways in which we have been defined in America. (xii)

Civil rights attorney Beverly Axelrod, who worked toward achieving racial justice in the 1960s and 70s, also discusses this specter of homosexuality in her client Eldridge Cleaver's 1968 essay collection *Soul on Ice*: "Our tragedy does not derive from our

¹⁸ (New York: Harper and Row, 1981, 1987)

fantasy of what homosexuals are but from what our fantasy of America is. We have made each other up” (qtd. in Russo xii).

Russo’s thinking above strongly informs this project: we might replace every instance of the words “gay” or “lesbian” and “sexuality” with “transgender” and “gender identity” and still have a series of plausible statements. Dominant US cultural discourse perpetuates an extremely narrow view of transgendered people, acknowledging only one aspect of these individuals’ highly intersectional identities and assuming that the isolated individual cases of transgendered people who do gain cultural visibility are fair and accurate representations of *all* transgendered people. Both before and after the Stonewall riots, dominant narratives of gender have placed transgendered people in a subordinate position to cisgendered¹⁹ people, due largely to transgender identity’s implications for and reconfiguring of heterosexuality.²⁰ According to Jay Prosser’s analysis of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*,

What Butler terms the “heterosexual matrix”...sustains heterosexuality as natural and naturalizes gender as sex. The naturalizing mechanism works both ways, shoring up the apparent naturalness of both sex/gender and heterosexual desire. The claim to “be” a man or woman is made possible by the binary and oppositional position of these terms within heterosexuality. (263)

¹⁹ Kristen Schilt and Laurel Westbrook use the term cisgender to describe “individuals who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity”; scholars, activists, and mental health professionals use the term to contrast with transgender (440-464). The prefix “cis-“ is derived from the field of chemistry and refers to molecules that remain on the same side (cis-) rather than “crossing over” (trans-).

²⁰ I shall return later to the problematic associations between transgender identity and sexual identity, ultimately suggesting that a major component of societal resistance to non-binary gender is its perceived disruption of the heterosexual/homosexual divide, yet another binary opposition that fails to encompass the actual diversity of human experience.

Therefore, any individual or group whose chosen expression of gender falls even slightly outside perceptible norms is automatically cast as Other, thereby establishing an us/them division that scholars in a diverse array of fields, from Victor Turner and Mary Douglas in anthropology, to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler in gender studies/feminist theory, to Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle in transgender studies, have argued is at the very root of discrimination against any social outgroup. To borrow from Axelrod, America has “made up what transgender people are” (Russo xii), and these ideas are reflected in its cinematic artifacts which tend to define transgender individuals solely in terms of their gender identity/expression, when it acknowledges them at all.

These narrow portrayals have the obvious but rarely-acknowledged aim (or certainly, at least, the effect) of preventing transgendered people from “expressing [their] existence in political terms” (Russo xii), thus achieving some manner of political agency and potentially the human rights that so many have so often been denied. However, this project will not declare what film texts *should* do to supplement transgender activism’s efforts. Despite plethoric theorization and cultural studies scholarship, even the most current research has demonstrated no absolute, direct, measurable, and reliably predictable causation between popular culture representation and real-world social phenomena, and it would thus be irresponsible to blame the movies entirely for the real-world violence perpetrated against transgendered people.

In fact, some films with transgender themes speak out strongly against such violence, though in an implicit and generally non-didactic manner. To refer again to

Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry*, this film exemplifies a message of non-violence: after more than an hour of deeply moving character development that inspires powerful pathos in all but the most stone-hearted viewer and the brief glimmer of hope that things may just work out all right, the audience is harshly confronted with the graphic rape and murder of Brandon Teena and at the film's conclusion left haunted by it; a preachy voiceover as the end credits roll is utterly unnecessary.

Despite the lack of proven causality mentioned above, various scholars have argued in favor of recognizing some type of *connection* between pop culture and behavior, and it is in this theoretical space that my work develops. To develop this idea, I point to John Phillips' discussion explicitly connecting Jean Baudrillard's "dissolution of the real" to media representation:

[T]he behaviors [popular culture texts] represent have a demonstrable influence on the behavior of viewers...As artists and poets have always known, representation influences how we see reality. * In a sea of images, representation has in so many respects conditioned our view of the real to the point where it can actually replace it...

In Baudrillard's postmodern view, the model or code structures social reality. The effect of this is the erosion of distinction between the model and the real, between representation and reality, and the impossibility of any direct access to the real, so that the 'real' as such disappears to be replaced by simulacra or simulations of reality. (166-68)

* Indeed, for Plato, no direct access to any reality is possible, since all we ever see are shadowy images of that reality, like the images projected by the sun on to the wall of a cave...[T]he first human beings created narratives about life which themselves provided the structures for living itself, how militaristic societies of the ancient world used artistic imagery to manipulate and control their populations, and finally, how religious representations have determined our attitudes to death and the afterlife.

Phillips suggests here that representation influences human conduct precisely because of its ability to stand in for and even replace the real. Thus, categories of human identity

such as sexuality and gender, as Phillips mentions, and even others like race and class, have no available linguistic fate *but* to experience slippage between the signifier (identity category) and the signified (person or group to whom the signifier is applied). As Louis Althusser suggests,²¹ “all social reality is mediated through representation” (Phillips 27); indeed, “[O]ur dependence on messages is a refuge from the real in representation, or rather, it generates situations in which the representation *is* the real...[L]ike a nervous actor without a script, reality takes its cue from representation” (28).

The implications of this concept are far-reaching: if we accept the idea that media representations have the substantive ability to influence how we see reality, and these representations do not reflect the diverse nature of reality, they miss an invaluable opportunity to reshape our view to one that *is* both reflective and accepting of such diversity. If films are assumed to be “narratives about life which themselves provide the structures for living itself,” then film as a medium of exchange has the potential to disseminate not only knowledge (by depicting gender categories that a) are functional in real life, and b) have been all but culturally invisible up to this point), but also belief structures, by depicting communities and societies that welcome the people who occupy these categories.²² As Feinberg argues,

[Transgendered people] are representative of the expanse of human variance, yet we do not see ourselves in culture, in language, or in

²¹ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

²² I will return in Chapter 2 to a discussion of the effect of social environment on gender identity, placing it within my larger conversation about the characteristics that I suggest form a “positive portrayal” of transgender.

everyday life, except in very twisted and distorted ways...[We need] a chance to represent our own lives in our own words...Each of our truths, articulated, is eloquent. (1998: 72)

Films that *do* offer transgendered people this opportunity are no longer merely a fantasy: increases in social acceptance and access to filmmaking technology and the emergence of new forms of media have led to the production of a number of films in the past decade made both by and for members of both the gay/lesbian and the transgender community; these include the component films of the New Queer Cinema movement that I discuss in Chapter 2, as well as individual documentaries like *Fenced Out* (2001), *Toilet Training* (2004), *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton's Cafeteria* (2005), *Middle Sexes: Redefining He and She* (2005), *TransGeneration* (2005), *Beautiful Daughters* (2006), *A Girl Like Me: The Gwen Araujo Story* (2006), and *Cruel and Unusual* (2006). These films present the possibility that human beings might form communities based not primarily on what about them is *different*, but on what about them is *similar*. As Eva Feder Kittay suggests, “If we start not with individuals in their separateness, but in their connectedness, we can read their demands for equality through these connections” (273).

1.3. Gender and Transgender: A Positive Account²³

I wish to avoid both strictly essentialist and strictly constructivist²⁴ views of both gender and transgender; to eliminate all acknowledgement of difference or to completely

²³ My treatment of this topic has benefited greatly from conversations with Bennett Burke, Carolyn Langford Hussein Fort, Elio Lewis, David Robinson, Daniel Silvermint, and Chad Van Schoelandt.

²⁴ The terms “constructionist” and “constructivist” tend to have similar meanings and usage in scholarship, though they do not refer to identical philosophies: social constructionism gained prominence in the U.S. with Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's 1967 book, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), while the origins of social constructivism are largely attributed to Jean Piaget's

universalize disparate traits or experiences of individuals within a larger group would be similarly pernicious. Both approaches do have value, as each can address questions or issues that the other does not take up, and when used together, both can generate fruitful conversation. As Daniel Ortiz argues in his account of gay identity, for example,

[Essentialism and constructivism] are different, to be sure, but not incompatible. In a sense, in fact, they are complementary: for some purposes, essentialism's description serves best; for other purposes, constructivism's description is more apt. Unless one sees each as a master description that can apply in all discussions of gay identity, no conflict arises between them. If one does see them as master descriptions, a conflict does arise, but then both descriptions fail their task. In other words, essentialism and constructivism conflict only if one demands a single description of gay identity for all conceivable purposes. When seen this way, we should be less surprised by the conflict than by the demand itself. For gay identity, like most forms of human identity, is too variegated, contested, and complex for any single term to capture. (1836)²⁵

I conceive of gender and transgender in a similar fashion, as “too variegated, contested, and complex for any single term to capture”; therefore, I draw the different/similar distinction in line with Sally Haslanger’s examination of the *role* of gender as a *concept* in human societies: “[W]hat work do we want [this] concept to do for us; why do we need [it] at all?” (156)

theory of cognitive development, which largely inspired Lev Vygotsky’s later works *Mind in Society* (1930, 1978) and *Thought and Language* (1934, 1986). The two theories differ in that social constructionism emphasizes the “artifacts,” or social constructs, that are created through social interactions within a group, while social constructivism focuses on the individual and the learning that takes place within that individual as a result of these group interactions. Both of these approaches are relevant to this discussion, so I will use the version of the term that appears in the work I am citing.

²⁵ Ortiz’s essay provides a comprehensive examination of the essentialism/constructivism debate that I shall not duplicate here. For another perspective on the debate, see Cheshire Calhoun, “Denaturalizing and Desexualizing Lesbian and Gay Identity,” *Virginia Law Review* 79:7(1993), Symposium on Sexual Orientation and the Law, 1859-1875.

Haslanger describes the difficulty of providing *any* unified account of an identity category through what she calls the “commonality problem” and “normativity problem” specifically with respect to the man/woman distinction. These problems both have the potential to inaccurately reflect the experiences of oppression shared by a *seemingly* homogenous group of people:

Very briefly, the commonality problem questions whether there is anything social that females have in common that could count as their “gender”... [T]here are reasons to doubt that there is anything beyond body type (if even that) that they all share (Spelman 1988).²⁶ The normativity problem raises the concern that any definition of “what woman is” is valueladen, and will marginalize certain females, privilege others, and reinforce current gender norms (Butler 1990, Ch. 1). (158)

The defining of transgender (and gender) in this project, then, shall not assume a universalizing set of characteristics or experiences for all persons of a given gender or transgender identity, nor draw arbitrary boundaries within which only people of “certain types” would be circumscribed. The very existence of categories, especially those concerning identity, is often inherently normative, as Haslanger suggests above: by its very existence, a society-wide “definition of gender” suggests that a society knows individual people’s genders better than they do, an obviously illogical premise:

[O]nly I can live my life and decide what is right for me. If I rely on someone else to make these decisions or set policy for me, then I am destined for disappointment...There are more than two or even three. Gender and behavior are as variable as the stars in the sky. There is no typical pattern which provides definitive proof that one is transgendered. There are so many similarities and even exact childhood histories...that it is impossible to rely on someone else’s experience to define yourself. No one has the answer, but you, and that answer is subject to change without notice. (Michael Hernandez, in Feinberg 1998: 76)

²⁶ Elizabeth Spelman, *The Inessential Woman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).

Given the above description of what I see gender and transgender *not* to be, I shall now give an account of how I *do* conceive of them. To provide an adequate basis for evaluation of the films in Chapters 3 and 4, these conceptions must accomplish two objectives: first, they must provide definitions for the categories that are at least functional enough to remain applicable across all four films. Second, they must answer Haslanger's question of what I want these terms to "do" within my discussions of the films: what ideological "work" is accomplished by my application of them, and what conclusions or outcomes result from such work?

To answer the first question and provide definitions that apply equally in all of the films, I must address the ever-present "sex/gender problem," that is, the general tendency of gender theorizing to link in discussion biological sexual characteristics and the psychological conception of gender. Granted, these discussions have proffered a variety of conclusions ranging from one end of the ideological spectrum to the other: some theoretical tradition dictates that sex and gender are causally intertwined, with one necessarily determining the other²⁷, while other academic examinations have suggested that virtually no causation exists between them.²⁸ This debate becomes problematic when trying to form a concept of gender that does not automatically invoke sex: whether

²⁷ See Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978); Susan Griffin, *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978). For a comprehensive but succinct account of radical feminist biological determinism, see Alison Jagger, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983).

²⁸ See Sylvia Yanagisako and Jane Collier, "The Mode of Reproduction in Anthropology," in *Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Difference*, ed. Deborah Rhode (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

gender is assumed to be derived from sex or not, biology generally serves as the underlying foundation for the concept. As Wilkins quips,

[A] central problem for gender theory has been that no matter what telling points are made about gender, Sex lurks right behind, pulling everything right back in the direction of immutable biology. “When it comes to reproduction there are,” a student reminded me at a college event, “inevitable differences between boys’ and girls’ bodies you can’t get around.” Of course there are. But the question has always been just how much difference that difference makes. Sex is not just about reproduction and the interesting property of some bodies to produce offspring when they are rubbed together at the right time. On the contrary, Sex is the primary property of all human bodies, including those that cannot now or never will participate in procreation... (84-5)

With this in mind, I will not take up the sex/gender question at all; a definitive answer to the question of where gender *comes from* will not address the issue of how gender *functions*. Therefore, I shall define the gender system as Susan Okin does, emphasizing its effects on human relations, a

historically, socially constructed differentiation between the sexes that feminists have come to call *gender*. We live in a society that has over the years regarded the innate characteristic of sex as one of the clearest legitimizers of different rights and restrictions... “[G]ender,” by which I mean the *deeply entrenched institutionalization of sexual difference* – still permeates our society. (6, emphasis in original)

The utility of this definition lies in its focus on how a system of gender has facilitated the oppression and injustice visited upon one gender (women) with its inherent assumption of the “naturalness” or “justice” of the superior rights and privileges granted to the other gender (men). It also provides a backdrop against which to discuss the concept of *transgender*: if the binary gender system assumes an imbalance of power and resources between women and men that is natural and right, and that these terms “women” and

“men” are defined through general consensus within dominant cultural discourse, transgender would encompass any gender-related phenomenon that disrupted or defied either of these assumptions.

Importantly, the hierarchal model does *not* extend to dominant discourse’s concept of transgender identity: transgender is not simply a “third term” in the hierarchy that is positioned below, and inferior to, the two primary terms. Rather, transgendered people are *displaced from the gender system altogether*, as they are identified as having no intelligible relationship to it; I shall return to this topic in Chapter 2. As Wilchins explains, the concept of gender transgression is itself discursively constructed, rather than having an existence predating that discourse, and the transgression is conceived in its defiance of the “Truth” of binary gender:

Two great discourses have attached themselves to the “problem” of gender transgression: medical/psychiatric and academic/feminist... These discourses do not study gender transgression; rather, they create it by presenting [cross-dressers, gender-queer children, transsexuals, and the intersexed] as suspect populations... The emphasis is not on showing how the gender system delegitimizes and silences difference but on revealing what transgender people *really* are *underneath*. Inevitably, the gender binary remains intact. (61, emphasis in original)

Ideally, a functional definition of transgender “would not reinforce but ... help undermine the structures of sexual [vis-à-vis gender] oppression” (Haslanger 158). Eliminating gender-based oppression from a society necessitates the abolition of hierarchical frameworks of gender like the one Okin envisions; a society utterly devoid of the recognition of differences between people is at best a utopian fantasy. However, it may be possible to uncouple the persistent association between difference and *hierarchy*

(and the resulting oppression and displacement). If we can understand transgender as merely one type of gender within a spectrum of socially equal identities, “one could argue that we should work towards a society free of gender in a materialist sense – one in which sex-oppression does not exist – while still allowing that sexual and reproductive differences should be taken into account in a just society” (Frye 1996; Gatens 1996).

To that end, I shall use the term transgender to describe people whose gender expressions or identities contradict contemporary cultural ‘scripts’ regarding gender and sexuality (or sexual orientation), a set of behaviors whose definition is in large part derived from these gender scripts; this formulation is a restatement of the “sex-gender-sexuality trinity” described at the beginning of this chapter. I wish to avoid excessive breadth in this definition; unqualified, it might dictate that a heterosexual married man who chose to stay home and care for the children and the home while his wife maintained a career should be included in the transgender category, an association that this hypothetical man might well strongly oppose. Therefore, I will clarify my definition above by describing the specific “scripts” that transgendered people contradict: most specifically, people are perceived to be “outside the bounds” of binary gender when they violate the assumed sex-gender-sexuality continuity, which dictates that sex must correlate to gender only in a one-to-one relationship, and that sexual object-choice must be oriented toward other people who are themselves clearly and predictably gendered.

Under this rubric, for example, I would not label gays and lesbians as transgendered simply because of their attraction to people of the same biological sex;

biological men attracted to other biological men, and biological women to other biological women do not violate the sex-gender continuity. Such individuals *might* fall under the transgender umbrella, though, if one or both parties to such an attraction were *not* biologically male or female, respectively. A biological man identifying as heterosexual and attracted to a biological man identifying as a woman, for example, would certainly seem to complicate the sex-gender-sexuality connection, as would an intimate relationship between a biological woman identifying as a lesbian and a biological woman identifying as a man. This hypothetical situation would become even more complicated if one or both people identified as neither male *nor* female but some third non-binary gender; the linguistic gymnastics required to accurately categorize *any* of the above configurations certainly seems apparent.

To expand the definition of transgender beyond merely sexual dimensions, I would include within it those individuals who adopt visible markers of a gender identity that seems not to correspond to their biological sex; biological men who engage in cross-dressing on either a temporary or permanent basis would be considered transgendered, as I use the label here not only to indicate the identity people see themselves as having, but how they are perceived by *others*, or how certain *images* come to have meaning. Our society has evolved significantly in its expectations about gender, but not so much that a biological man strolling down a sidewalk clad in an evening gown, full face make-up, and high heels while also sporting a full beard would not at least raise an eyebrow or two. I would likewise include in my definition biological women who participate in the masculine half of butch-femme culture, as regardless of the gender or sexuality labels

these individuals adopt for themselves (which are by no means universal across the culture as a whole), they certainly operate outside of the sex-gender roles that are generally socially perceived as “feminine.”

As I hope the above examples have made clear, my definition of transgender focuses not on the particular ways that any individual person performs gender or sexuality; such behaviors vary from person to person, and even within the same person, given the right situation. Rather, what *is* central to my sense of transgender identity, and my study of the films in Chapters 3 and 4, is the degree of either compliance or defiance that transgender people exhibit regarding cultural binary gender norms. Thus, any behavior or set of behaviors that demonstrate a high degree of defiance of this binarism would be categorized as transgendered; those exhibiting more compliance to the two-gender system would not. It may seem a tempting solution to the problem of binary gender categories to simply create a third category and label it “Other”; this category could then be assumed to contain all manifestations of gender that failed to match the man-woman binary. However, Vivian Namaste argues unequivocally that such a category would be in all ways inadequate:

“Other” is clearly insufficient as an interpretative classification that seeks to comprehend the unique experiences of transvestites, transsexuals, and transgenderists. It forecloses a consideration of the diversity of identities, bodies, and experiences among transgendered people, and it does not begin by inquiring how transsexuals locate themselves in the social and institutional world. (43)

The term “transgender” as it is used in this project may be subject to similar criticism; using it to group together individuals with vastly different experiences of and chosen

paths through the social world may have the effect of erasing or minimizing the important differences between them. However, as Nestle herself and many other theorists choose the term as the most inclusive one currently available, I shall follow that belief and employ it here.

The second requirement for my definitions of gender and transgender is that they answer Haslanger's question of what I wish the terms to do. This question may seem difficult to answer without contradicting this project's suggestion of eliminating the gender system altogether: if I wish to suggest that society would be better off "without gender," as many theorists have done, Haslanger and Okin among them, why would I attempt to make the terms even more concrete by providing standardized definitions for them? This is certainly a fair question; I would respond by arguing that in order to facilitate the removal of transphobia, we must first recognize and be able to name the *effects* of transphobic *behavior*, so that we might work systematically to induce social change in each specific realm where it is needed. Therefore, the work that I wish the terms gender and transgender to do is to point to moments in film where the binary gender system has direct, tangible (often adverse) effects on individuals, those individuals perceived as defying that system in particular. My discussions of the films will explore the ways in which the gender system is itself oppressive, unjust, and overtly hostile to performances of gender identity that seem to operate in conflict with it. As an alternative, I will present readings of other moments in the films that allow and/or encourage individuals to "color outside the lines" of the gender binary and express more diverse identities.

I wish to tread carefully in characterizing gender identity as a social artifact that has some essential and consistent quality; arguing that gender is a “real” concept might appear transprogressive, in that if gender and its subclassifications “man” and “woman” are assumed to possess consistent definitions, we might achieve justice for the transgender community if we merely revised those definitions to make them more inclusive. As Cheshire Calhoun suggests in her reading of Judith Butler’s “particular de-essentializing strategy” for lesbian representation,

The illusion of a natural binarism of gender categories into ‘woman’ and ‘man’ is the result of repetitive (and panicked) performances of a unity between body, gender, and (heterosexual) desire... “[I]n acting in a masculine way, [the mannish lesbian] *changes the very meaning of what it is to be a woman*; indeed, she expands the meaning of what it means to be a woman to include a cultural possibility that it previously excluded” (Butler 253-262, 260,²⁹ Calhoun’s emphasis). (Calhoun 71)

However, what might appear to be a liberating ideological shift might in fact create more problems than it solved: without providing a usable definition of the term “woman” itself, this formulation would still assume “woman” to be a valid foundational category within which lesbians should be included, a move that Calhoun characterizes as a failure to achieve a “difference-sensitive feminism.” We might apply this same conclusion to a woman of transgender identity:

Once ‘woman’ is denaturalized and opened up in this way, the [transgendered woman] might find herself in a hopeless representational position. *Nothing* she does may count as positioning her outside of the category ‘woman’. *Everything* she does may be read simply as expanding the meaning of ‘woman’. What was originally intended in feminism as a

²⁹ Judith Butler, “Gendering the Body: Beauvoir’s Philosophical Contribution,” *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

move away from a totalizing conception of ‘woman’ that was incapable of admitting differences between women, now becomes totalizing in a quite different way. Although virtually any self-representation may be permitted within the category ‘woman’, and the meaning of ‘woman’ remains perpetually open to contestation, the one thing that may not be possible is self-representation *outside* of that category. (71, emphasis in original)

Such “representation outside the category” is precisely what this project calls for: the existing categories of “man” and “woman” fail to acknowledge the differences between transgendered and cisgendered people, the mind-body-desire relationship only one such difference. To uncritically place transgender people within the respective categories of “man” and “woman” allows us not to see them as transgendered, but only women or men with a different anatomy or physical appearance:

Within a world populated solely by men and women, the cross-dresser *as a cross-dresser* disappears. “This tendency to erase the third term, to appropriate the cross-dresser ‘as’ one of the two sexes, is,” Garber notes, “emblematic of a fairly consistent critical desire to look away from the transvestite as transvestite, not to see cross-dressing except as male or female manqué....And this tendency might be called an *underestimation* of the object (Garber 10)”. (Calhoun 73)

To describe my vision of this hypothetical “world without gender,” a difficult situation to imagine into existence without some specific parameters to contain it, I point to George Dvorsky and James Hughes’ 2008 essay “Postgenderism: Beyond the Gender Binary.” This useful essay outlines the history of binary categories’ centrality to human societies and proposes that modern and future advances in science and technology will allow the liberatory achievement of complete elimination of binary gender and its associated expectations:

Postgenderists argue that gender is an arbitrary and unnecessary limitation on human potential, and foresee the elimination of involuntary biological

and psychological gendering in the human species ... Postgenderists contend that dyadic gender roles and sexual dimorphisms are generally to the detriment of individuals and society. Postgenderists do not call for the end of all gender traits, or universal androgyny, but rather that those traits become a matter of choice. Bodies and personalities in our postgender future will no longer be constrained and circumscribed by gendered traits, but enriched by their use in the palette of diverse self-expression. (2)

Like other feminist and queer theorists, Dvorsky and Hughes do not suggest that no differences be acknowledged between people of different genders; they emphasize instead that in an ideal world, these differences would be *chosen*, rather than forced upon people. Further, they highlight psychological studies conducted in 2003 to measure gender role “androgyny” which concluded that, “The androgynous had the highest self-esteem, psychological well-being and emotional intelligence, while those at the psychological extremes of gender were re-cast as constrained and disabled (Guastello and Guastello, 2003)” (6).

Various cultural institutions and psychological movements eventually began to incorporate the value of this androgyny, which laid the groundwork for the radicalization of emerging transgender and transsexual subcultures into a postgenderist movement. While the early pioneers of gender transition were “far from postgenderist” (6), largely enacting hyper-exaggerated stereotypes of their new genders, their successors eventually began to question the wisdom of adopting such extreme presentations to legitimate these new identities. This “genderqueer politics” paved the way for future evolutions of feminist, queer, and transgender theories, which I shall discuss in the next section.

1.4. No More Checkboxes! Transgender Theory and Abolition of the Gender Binary

The academic field of transgender studies has and continues to fight an uphill battle for acceptance, both within the scholarly community and in society at large. In addition to establishing itself as a separate discipline from queer or gay and lesbian studies, though frequently intersecting with both, transgender studies has adopted the task of not only articulating the nature of transgender identity, but also reclaiming that identity from the purview of abnormal psychology, which had previously ascribed some manner of mental illness to all instances of alternative gender presentation, and literary studies, which tended by and large to read occurrences of cross-dressing as “merely symbolic” rather than indicative of some core identity (Stryker 2006: 2).

Transgender studies as a distinct field did not even emerge in the academy until the mid-to-late 1990s: much like the homophile and gay civil rights movements that began four decades earlier, transgender scholarship grew out of community activism driven by the belief that being transgendered did *not* indicate the existence of a mental or medical disorder. Like homosexuality, transgender as a linguistic distinction needed repositioning in the American lexicon, a release from the grip of medical and mental health professionals desiring to “diagnose” and then “cure” it, and a new placement adjacent to male, female, heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and others as simply one more acceptable iteration of gender/sexual identity.³⁰

³⁰ This dissertation makes every effort to maintain the clear distinction between gender identity and sexual orientation. The comparison here between transgender and homosexuality is not meant to suggest that transgender identity is constitutive of *any* particular sexual object-choice, but merely to illustrate how the

Scholars have pondered examples of transgender *phenomena* since the nineteenth century³¹; the field of transgender *studies*, however, has evolved much more recently, the earliest collected anthology to include the phrase in its title appearing just five years ago. *The Transgender Studies Reader* (ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle) carefully distinguishes between these two endeavors, asserting that

[t]he ‘study of transgender phenomena’...is a long-standing, on-going project in cultures of European origin. Transgender studies, on the other hand, is the relatively new critical project that has taken shape in the past decade or so. It is intimately related to emergent ‘postmodern conditions’ for the production of knowledge, and is as innovative methodologically as it is epistemologically. (12)

Rather than using “supposedly more ‘objective’ forms of knowledge,” such as those collected from an exterior position (i.e., a medical or mental health professional and *not* the transgender person him/herself) to further understanding of transgender identity, transgender studies relies heavily upon the “embodied experience of the speaking subject” as a not only acceptable but essential component of an analysis of transgender phenomena. Transgender studies, then, might be aptly labeled a postmodern mode of theorization, as it acknowledges the centrality to scholarship of experiential knowledge,

initial aim of scholars in both fields (de-pathologization of a given identity’s variation from the “norm”) was similar.

³¹ For an extended discussion of these early investigations, see Stryker’s “(De)subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies.” In *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker & Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006, 1-17). This introduction to the anthology cites the work of Richard von Krafft-Ebbing, Karl von Westphal, Max Marcuse, Magnus Hirschfeld, Havelock Ellis, and Sigmund Freud as examples of the (earlier) psychological/psychiatric approach to examining transgender, then points to Harry Benjamin and his colleagues Robert Stoller, Richard Green, and John Money as originators of the medical literature of “gender dysphoria,” work that eventually led to the newly-included clinical entity “gender identity disorder” in the American Psychological Association’s *DSM-III* (1980).

asserting that no “voice” in any dialogue should hold the privilege of obscuring the particularities of its own speaking position.

Postmodernism is certainly not a cure-all for the tensions among theories of sex, gender, and sexuality: Wilchins outlines the major limitations of a postmodern approach to theorization in general, suggesting with a touch of humor that the very abstractions with which it operates may seem to lead to ultimately circular logic with no identifiable utility in the real world:

As Foucault observed, we are condemned to produce truth in order to live in society...Postmodernism’s own truth claims are about the *nature* of truth claims. By working “one level up,” so to speak, it pretends that it escapes promoting universal Truths and normative assumptions – the very problem it attacks. Of course it does not escape this at all. It sometimes appears circular and without a point, since it is not making its own claims about what really is but rather providing tools for dismantling other people’s claims about what really is...[F]rustration is...a consequence of the difficulty of having to think about thought, of questioning the meaning of meaning, of losing the innocent use of reason, truth, and language. (98)

All hope is not lost, however; Wilchins goes on to say that not only is such frustration “not a sign of failure; it’s the point of the exercise” (98). Further, the application of critique, part of Derrida’s foundation for postmodern thought, “is understood as progress because it enables new things, or at least different things, to emerge. Critique is therefore itself political action for the better” (99). Critiques of the gender system have granted increased legitimacy to people on the margins – transsexuals, homosexuals, the intersexed, and cross-dressers. Ultimately, she argues, we must *use* the insights gained from postmodern critique to bring about change, lest it remain a mere exercise in thought:

[U]nless we bring gender theory out of the ivory towers and put it to work in the streets, we may be witnessing the birth of a major philosophic movement that succeeds in politicizing practically everything but produces practically nothing in the way of organized, systemic social change. And that would be a pity. (106)

Transgender and feminist or queer theories appear to have a number of methodological similarities; however, transgender studies scholars hasten to point out the important disconnects between these academic endeavors. For example, one major limitation of queer theory is its perceived lack of “sensitivity” to the lived experiences of transgender people. As Namaste argues,

Queer theory as it is currently practiced must be challenged because it exhibits a remarkable insensitivity to the substantive issues of transgendered people’s everyday lives. Given this utter disregard for how transgendered people live, a rejection of queer theory based on such a political argument is both worthy and warranted (23)...Critics in queer theory write page after page on the inherent liberation of transgressing normative sex/gender codes, but they have nothing to say about the precarious position of the transsexual woman who is battered and who is unable to access a woman’s shelter because she was not born a biological woman. (9-10)

Perhaps born of a lack of direct “objective form of knowledge” of such an experience, queer theory’s efforts by and large tend to elide discussion of such lived phenomena, directing attention instead to larger theoretical questions.

Gayle Salomon echoes this concern about elision of real experiences in her discussion of the relationship between feminism, women’s studies in the academy, and transgender studies, asserting that

feminism...has not been able to keep pace with non-normative genders as they are thought, embodied, and lived...Genders beyond the binary of male and female are neither fictive nor futural, but are presently embodied

and lived, and the discipline of women's studies has not yet taken account of this. (95)

Feminism relies upon the idea that a stable category called "Woman" does in fact exist, the very assumption that transgender studies seems most interested in dismantling:

[W]e understand the task of trans studies to be the breaking apart of this category, particularly if that breaking requires a new articulation of the relation between sex and gender, between male and female. Indeed, the specificity of trans as a kind of subjectivity uniquely suited to pose a challenge to fixed taxonomies of gender meets resistance in the specificity of women's studies as a discipline whose very essence depends upon gender to conform to just such a fixed taxonomy. (98)

To address this problem, feminist theory has shifted its focus to "methodologies rather than subjects," adopting a model of "additive subjectivity" to increase the range of subjects it can represent. Rather than dismantling the category of "Woman," feminists have conceived two models of this additive subjectivity, one that adds subject positions to a universal that had not previously recognized them (women of color, lesbian women, and disabled women are also women), and one that acknowledges the centrality to personhood of these additional modes of subjectivity.

This additive subjectivity has its drawbacks, however; Salomon summarizes Wendy Brown's³² perceived insufficiencies of its attempts to account for difference in the following terms:

First, it operates under the mistaken assumption that power functions primarily as a force of subjugation, ignoring the productive capacities of power, the fact that it does not just oppress subjects, but fundamentally makes them. Furthermore, power cannot be understood to operate the same way in making race, class, or sexuality; different kinds of power,

³² Wendy Brown, "The Impossibility of Women's Studies," *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005)116-135.

operating according to different norms and having different aims, are operative in each instance. Finally, a subject conceived as “intersectional,” as cleanly joined layers or partitions of identity demarcated along separate axes of interpellation, bears little relation to any kind of lived subjectivity[.] (Salomon 99-100)

Scholars concur that transgender studies does “need feminism,” with the systemic understanding it provides of the structures of gender and the power relations underlying these structures; without this understanding, transgender studies cannot conceive of gender as a historical category and articulate an account of how its present state has come to exist. To resolve the tension between transgender and feminist studies, though, scholarship and theory must attempt to answer the following question: “[I]s there a way trans studies might negotiate some of the more vexing difficulties of women’s studies, such as the cultivation of a space that can bear a certain degree of gender nominalism, without lapsing into normativity?” (Salomon 100). A viable answer to this question would have to be one that not only accounted for the existence of intersecting identities, but also allowed those identities to be named and lived, in the real world, without that naming itself becoming normative.

Stryker also comments on the limitations of queer theory in accounting for transgender experience, examining queer theory’s emphasis on sexuality and desire rather than its direct commentary on transgendered people, referring in her critique to Duggan’s conception of homonormativity:

Queer studies, though putatively antiheteronormative, sometimes fails to acknowledge that same-sex object choice is not the only way to differ from heterosexist cultural norms, that transgender phenomena can also be antiheteronormative, or that transgender phenomena constitute an axis of difference that cannot be subsumed to an object-choice model of

antiheteronormativity. As a result, queer studies sometimes perpetuates what might be called ‘homonormativity,’ that is, a privileging of homosexual ways of differing from heterosexual norms, and an antipathy (or at least an unthinking blindness) toward other modes of queer difference. (7)

In Stryker’s view, transgender studies lends more weight to questions of embodiment and identity than those of sexual desire, adopting a theory of what might be termed “trans-identity.” This term concurs with Salomon and Brown’s idea that identity is a pluralistic construct of numerous cross-cutting issues, such as race, class, age, disability, and nationality, and is in this case thus too complex to reduce to merely an individual’s sexual object-choice.

Anthropologist David Valentine contributes to this conversation through an ethnographic lens: in his book *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of A Category*, Valentine argues for recognizing the important distinctions between transgender and other types of queer identity:

[T]ransgender identification is understood across these domains to be explicitly and fundamentally different in origin and being from homosexual identification, a distinction referred to in the social sciences as *ontological* (4)...[I]f in the contemporary United States ‘transgender’ describes a deviation from gender norms, then ‘homosexuality’ indicates same-sex eroticism between *gender-normative people*. (15)

Valentine’s study of transgender sex workers in Manhattan’s Meat Market district in the early 1990s uncovers exactly the ambiguity that transgender studies as a field has grappled with throughout its history: various individuals in the study who might be assumed by others to be clearly transgender, transsexual, or transvestite adopt a self-proclaimed combination of these terms, or occasionally, none of them at all, suggesting

the limited utility even of terms explicitly designed to be inclusive of a range of identity expressions.

Valentine describes his examination of transgender as a kind of Foucauldian genealogy that also echoes Haslanger's concern with the function of linguistic distinctions: "Put another way (in James Ferguson's³³ Foucauldian terms), rather than simply asking, 'What does this concept *mean*; what does it really refer to?' I want to ask 'How and to what extent is this concept deployed; what does it *do*?' (Valentine 30, qtd. from Ferguson 205, emphasis in original). As previously outlined, I adopt a similar approach, examining not only what transgender "means" for each of the characters who embody the identity, but also what it "does," that is, how the category itself of transgender is not only descriptive of a given set of historical truths, but also productive of the phenomena and associated social circumstances that it attempts to describe.

In an effort to provide as complete as possible a historical view of transgender in the United States, Stryker and Joanne Meyerowitz both published volumes on the "histories" of transgender and transsexuality, at times combining their efforts, as Meyerowitz mentions in her Acknowledgements: "Susan Stryker deserves first mention for showing me the benefits of collaborative endeavor. We worked together on our overlapping histories via email, snail mail, and telephone..." (343) Stryker also comments on the significance of broader historical efforts, new and distinct as they were

³³ James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

from the first generation of transgender literature, a category previously composed mostly of individual autobiographies or narratives:

Most often, transgender-related topics have been written about as personal issues - something that an individual experiences inwardly and works to bring into social reality by sharing it with others...[This book] focuses instead on the collective political history of transgender social change activism in the United States. (2008: 1-2)

For both authors, the situating of transgender identity within a larger social and cultural context was of utmost importance, as they and other scholars after them wished to bring transgender out of the isolated confines of individual life experiences and into a much more public forum for the purposes of increasing both awareness and discussion.

Scholars and activists adopting this broadened approach to transgender studies soon realized the necessity of interrogating the gender system itself: if transgendered people constituted a significant enough portion of the human population to spark widespread and persistent demands for political and social change, it seemed logical to ask whether the system of categorization that marginalized the community in the first place really held any ongoing value. As mentioned above by Stryker and other historians of the transgender movement, many such examinations came from transgendered people themselves, as their subject position allowed them insight into the sociopolitical reality of being a transgendered person, knowledge acquired only through abstraction by non-trans people. In fact, some transgender scholars have expressed open resentment of transgender scholarship conducted by non-transgendered people, viewing their efforts as “a long history of usurping and appropriating the lives and identities of trans people for use in their own academic research” (Ryan 20). This dissertation will not comment on the

validity or spuriousness of such a characterization, but in 1997, transgender studies scholar Jacob Hale compiled a list of suggested rules for non-transgender people writing about trans issues, implying a widespread belief in the trans community that at least some aspects of such work were problematic.³⁴

To combat oppressive binary gender norms, many ruminations on the gender binary adopted an adversarial approach: transgendered people perceived themselves as victims of a categorical framework that attempted to force authentic expressions of gender identity to fit within more “acceptable” (more binary) forms. Thus, the gender hierarchy itself, and those who would perpetuate it, were depicted as aggressors in a battle between unequal foes; the straight community had the benefit of traditions, hegemonic ideals, and centuries of virtually unaltered conceptions of gender to support its claims of the “real” and “natural” quality of binarism. The transgender community, on the other hand, had only its comparatively small, comparatively politically powerless cacophony of individual and occasionally dissident voices claiming that not only might a more pluralistic system of categorization exist, but that perhaps categorization of any kind should not be the aim of gender politics at all.

Activist, playwright/performance artist, and scholar Kate Bornstein proposes such a notion in her 1994 book *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. Part autobiography, part theoretical reflection, the book suggests both the absolute centrality in American culture of the binary gender system and Bornstein’s corresponding rebellion

³⁴ Jacob Hale, “Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans _____,” *sandystone.com* (n.p., 18 November 2009, first published 5 January 1997), 22 February 2012.

against it, as she realized time and time again throughout her life its inadequacy in capturing the entirety of her own experience of identity: “[T]he need for a recognizable identity, and the need to belong to a group of people with a similar identity – these are driving forces in our culture, and nowhere is this more evident than in the areas of gender and sexuality” (3). Bornstein argues that, based on her own experiences as a “transsexual lesbian whose female lover is becoming a man,” the “camps” of male, female, gay, straight, et al, seem increasingly less applicable.

To those who would remain insistent on maintaining such binary oppositions, Bornstein applies the epithet “Gender Defenders,” a revision of the label “gender terrorist” that she previously applied to herself and other transgender people:

For a while, I thought that it would be fun to call what I do in life gender terrorism. Seemed right at first – I and so many folks like me were terrorizing the structure of gender itself. But I’ve come to see it a bit differently now...Gender terrorists are those who...bang their heads against a gender system which is *real* and *natural*, and who then use gender to terrorize the rest of us. These are the real terrorists: the Gender Defenders. (71)

If we conceive of terrorism as the use of fear, intimidation, and the threat of physical harm or violence to coerce people into adopting certain beliefs or behaviors, such strident advocacy of binary gender norms certainly seems to fit that definition, as the tangible *consequences* of gender terrorism for trans people often include precisely these elements.

The especially malevolent quality of such tactics, though, is their potential impact on even those individuals who do *not* engage in deliberate gender transgression:

Bornstein suggests that in addition to attempting to pigeonhole openly transgendered people, the gender system also tends toward “failing” *everyone* at some point:

It seems to be rigged that way. Sometimes, even with all the effort we put into obeying the rules, we get hurt. We can get badly hurt by being a real man or a real woman...How does someone come to terms with the demands of a rigid, nearly monolithic, universal gender system?...[By becoming gender outlaws themselves...] Bridging the gap between him or herself and the outlaws, the now-former-gender-defender can't devalue the outsider without devaluing him or herself...And this brings up a lot of anger. Because...[w]e've chosen to stand with the oppressed. But standing with freaks never hurt anyone – it's when we agree that we *deserve* the oppression and the ridicule that accompanies the freak's position in the culture – that's when the wound is mortal...If we can't call the freaks names anymore because we realize we're one of them, then we have to look back at our position as a former insider, and we begin to devalue *that*.
(80-81)

Particularly relevant to the topic of transgender representation in film is Bornstein's conception of this transition from victimizer to activist: for people to abandon their faith in the gender system, they must be confronted by its flaws and failings, as applicable to their own lives.

As this abandonment occurs, the “former defenders” extrapolate this insufficiency into the lives of *other* people, likely those they once viewed as the “capital-O” Other, and demand the formulation of new epistemological modes, or ways of knowing. Thus, activism of any sort requires the participation of at least some contingent of the majority or dominant culture, as the impetus for change cannot and will not occur until the majority itself is perceptibly harmed by the status quo. Filmmakers of either cisgender or transgender identity therefore have the opportunity for *activism* by the very *act* of making movies: by presenting characters and narratives that exemplify the gender outlaw,

these artists *compel* their audiences to examine the inadequacies of binary gender, first in the world of the film, and then, ideally, and more importantly, in their *own* world, inciting the process of tangible cultural change.

1.5. Conclusion

This project assumes that transgendered people are not simply anatomical men or women who have failed to embrace their “real” gender, insisting instead upon occupying some intermediate position in what dominant discourse implies should be a binary system. The process of inscribing one of only two arbitrary linguistic signifiers upon these individuals without their express consent leads to harsh sanctions when some aspect of their physicality or behavior fails the test of absolute conformity with this label. The majority of American films featuring transgendered characters commit the error of oversimplification, attempting to depict transgender experience as much simpler than it is, a matter of a few ounces of flesh, or a few yards of fabric. As Joelle Ruby Ryan argues in her dissertation *Reel Gender: Examining the Politics of Trans Images in Film and Media*,

Despite shifts in representation, one quickly comes to the conclusion that the *majority* of images of trans people repeatedly downplays the social, cultural, and political implications of trans people’s lives, and focuses instead on micro-level experiences and salacious personal details. For example, issues such as sexuality, sex reassignment surgery, and non-accepting family members are overrepresented in media depiction. However, issues such as discrimination, *the binary gender system* and civil rights initiatives, which have been a focus of the transgender movement, are rarely depicted (18, emphasis added)...What I found is that in general transgender characters are most often represented as deceptive, maniacal, tragic, victimized and without supportive community or a sense of

political agency to transform their own life and the society as a whole.
(22)

This project will offer a comprehensive and nuanced version of what it “means” to be a transgendered person or to *perform transgendered behaviors*; to paraphrase Russo at the close of his introduction to *The Celluloid Closet*, “We have cooperated for a very long time in the maintenance of [transgender’s] invisibility. And now the party is over” (xii).

CHAPTER TWO: QUEERNESS AT THE THEATER: FEMINIST, QUEER, AND TRANSGENDER THEORIES OF FILM

2.1. How to Read A Film?

The scholarly analysis of film can take many forms; we might examine the apparatus of the media itself, considering the ways in which technological advances and new forms of media have contributed to expanded meanings and representations on the big screen as well as the smaller, even handheld one. Alternatively, we could conceive of the medium as a kind of cultural lens, allowing us to “see inside” filmic texts and decipher the multiplicitous cultural, psychological, and even political forces that dictate the way films say what they say and/or do what they do. My project adopts the latter approach, as I examine film portrayals themselves and the effects that these portrayals can have upon the perceptions and beliefs of their viewers. In this chapter I will begin by discussing feminist film theory and its contributions to the subsequent efforts of queer and transgender film theory, the two fields of inquiry most central to this project.

I will conclude by describing an ideal “positive portrayal” of transgender to which I will compare the films in Chapters 3 and 4; to provide a brief preview of this account, I suggest that since we do not live in the “world without gender” alluded to in Chapter 1, representations in film that are *completely* neutral to gender differences and *completely* egalitarian in their portrayals of various gender identities seem difficult to imagine, as gender differences continue to have such significance in real-life society. I do not mean to suggest that the “goal” of film should be to offer some monolithic ideology of gender; rather, I concur with Ann-Marie Cook’s suggestion that

[f]ilms may endorse or critique values and ideologies; they may send explicit messages or offer ambiguous meanings that require audiences to generate their own interpretations. What they do not do, however, is offer an objective *reflection* of society and it is important that we use language that captures in the most accurate way the relationship between texts and context. I propose an alternative phrasing that situates films as *engagements* with other discourses ... ‘Reflect’ connotes passivity and coincides with the structuralist view that culture exists as something predetermined and external to the film itself. By contrast, ‘engage’ acknowledges the capacity of films to endorse, critique or problematise aspects of culture at the same time that it recognises the film’s place within the very culture being scrutinised. An additional benefit of seeing films as engagements with rather than reflections of ideology is that it is consistent with the cultural studies perspective wherein texts exist as sites of ideological struggle, not as conduits of unambiguous, monolithic meanings. (3)

In addition to their often restrictive portrayals of gender, some contemporary films also contain elements suggesting a more expansive view of gender than the strict and simplistic two-model binary, and I shall provide a comprehensive account of these elements with the intention of pointing them out in the films where they occur.

2.2. Feminist Film Theory: Representation and Erasure

Early feminist film theory focused chiefly on representation, initially of women themselves, and later of ‘other oppressed peoples’: the realization dawned immediately that it would be impossible for film to depict a “utopian moment when ‘images of women’ [would] ‘reflect’ the realities of women’s lives: cinematic representations [were] far more complex than this” (Thornham 1). The larger project of feminism has been to “transform women from an object of knowledge into a subject capable of appropriating knowledge (Delmar 1986: 25),” as well as producing knowledge; much of the conflict over how to reclaim a woman subject position revolved around issues of “seeing,” long

considered a crucial mode of knowledge across Western cultures. Essentially, feminist film theory has attempted to reclaim women as cinematic objects from the position of “being seen” to that of “doing the seeing,” thereby acquiring their own forms of knowledge that did not depend on being mediated through the so-called “male gaze” discussed most prominently by Laura Mulvey, as well as other film theorists who followed her work.³⁵

Mulvey’s 1975 article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” remains a core text in the canon of feminist film theory, as it was among the first scholarly texts to draw an explicit link between film theory, psychoanalysis, and feminism. Mulvey suggests that the figurative spectator imagined by Hollywood films of the 1950s and 60s was invariably coded as male, or masculine, and that the female as narrative object was coded with “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” (63, emphasis in original). In this heteronormative formulation, which is ultimately a function of the ideology of a patriarchal order, women are simultaneously looked at and placed on deliberate display, yet while serving this function in the film narrative, they also serve to “freeze the flow of action” at moments of erotic contemplation and must then be re-integrated into the cohesive flow of the story. Of particular note is not merely the woman’s position as viewed object, but the way that her “looked-at-ness” is structured, which Mulvey describes as simultaneously voyeuristic and scopophilic:

³⁵ See, for example, Mary Ann Doane, “*Caught and Rebecca: The Inscription of Femininity as Absence,*” *Enclitic 5:2* (1981): 75-89; Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (London: Macmillan, 1984); Annette Kuhn, *Women’s Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982); Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

As Budd Boetticher has put it,

[w]hat counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love and fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance. (63)

Here, the woman holds “value” in the film narrative only insofar as her presence or existence serves to propel it forward; she is granted no agency or power “in herself.”

Obviously this framework would preclude woman-centered narratives that depicted female characters exercising their power, personal autonomy, and/or in some way transgressing the dominant patriarchal norms that existed in the off-screen world.³⁶

Mulvey herself does not suggest that no classical Hollywood films featured female protagonists; she references Pam Cook and Claire Johnston’s study³⁷ of *The Revolt of Mamie Stover* to demonstrate the existence of just such a narrative trope. However, films of this type were certainly not the norm, and discussing them at length would, as Mulvey explains, “take her too far afield” (64); thus her study focuses mainly on the male gaze at male-centered films.

Mulvey’s arguments about the woman-as-spectacle onscreen sparked a litany of responses and further theorizing within feminist film scholarship: Judith Mayne added

³⁶ Mulvey returned to these ideas in a 2007 ‘sequel’ to the original article entitled “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ inspired by *Duel in the Sun*.” Here she claims to stand by her original argument supporting the wisdom of allowing the singular third-person male to stand in for the generic “spectator,” though she does acknowledge that this approach closes off certain other important lines of inquiry, including the aforementioned female-protagonist trope, as well as the “woman-in-the-audience” question. Ultimately, Mulvey characterizes her newer essay as being concerned first with the female spectator, and whether or not this hypothetical construct can be wholly engaged through “identification with a male hero,” and second with the narrowing of a discussion of “melodrama” to only those films featuring a female protagonist who is in some way “unable to achieve a stable sexual identity.” I discuss the original essay more extensively in this dissertation, however, because the ideas that Mulvey DOES re-affirm are relevant to current and ongoing discussions of both queer and transgender film theory.

³⁷ In Phil Hardy, ed., *Raoul Walsh* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Film Festival, 1974).

another dimension to the idea of the woman as looked-at object in a 1978 round-table discussion, questioning the often complex relationship between portrayals of women on the screen and real women's experiences in their lives:

One of the most basic connections between women's experience in this culture and women's experience in film is precisely the relationship of spectator and spectacle. Since women are spectacles in their everyday lives, there's something about coming to terms with film from the perspective of what it means to be an object of spectacle and what it means to be a spectator that is really coming to terms with how that relationship exists both up on the screen and in everyday life. (Citron et al. 1978: 115)

The challenge for the female viewer, as Mayne argues, is then to in some way make sense of the relationship she observes between the spectacle and the spectator roles, both in the cinematic realm and in her own day-to-day experiences. This process is made challenging by the assumed "invisibility" of women both on- and offscreen; as B. Ruby Rich adds to Mayne's assertion:

According to Mulvey, the woman is not visible in the audience which is perceived as male; according to Johnston³⁸, the woman is not visible on the screen...As a woman going into a movie theater, you are faced with a context that is coded wholly for your invisibility, and yet, obviously, you are sitting there and bringing along a certain coding from life outside the theater. How does one enter into the experience of the film given that kind of structure?...How does one formulate an understanding of a structure that insists on our absence even in the face of our presence? What is there in a film with which a woman viewer identifies? (Citron et al. 1978: 116)

These are *precisely* the types of questions that I will suggest warrant examination in film as it relates to queer and transgender identity, though both of these identities refuse the sutured implications of woman as category, while the feminist film analyses I

³⁸ Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema As Counter-Cinema," *Notes in Women's Cinema* (London, 1973).

have discussed thus far did not place such emphasis on defining the concept of woman itself. Further, the development of intersectionality as a conceptual foundation³⁹ for identity theorizing drew attention to earlier feminist scholarship's tendency to conflate a dominant cultural experience (in this case, that of white, middle- and upper-class women) with some assumed "universal" experience (that of *all* women), a generalization that proves ultimately false.⁴⁰ As even more complex categories than that of "woman," queer and transgender identity have even less claim to a universalized experience of those identities. Finally, as I discussed in Chapter 1, transgender and other queer identities have been actively excluded from the formulations of identity offered by much of the work of feminism and women's studies in the frequent failure of both fields to acknowledge the qualities of transgender and queer identity that are fundamentally different from binary male/female, heterosexual identity.

2.3. Transgender Displacement and Denial⁴¹

I would like to expand my discussion here of Cheshire Calhoun's account of lesbian and gay subordination, which she does not see as arising within a disadvantaged

³⁹ See Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991): 1241-1299.

⁴⁰ See Benjamin Barber, *Liberating Feminism* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1976); Carol Ehrlich, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Can It Be Saved?" *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage Between Marxism and Feminism*, ed. Lydia Sargent (Boston: South End Press, 1981) 10-12; Leah Fritz, *Dreamers and Dealers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980); bell hooks, "Black Women: Shaping Feminist History," *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984) 1-15, 165.

⁴¹ I would like to say once again that I am indebted to Cheshire Calhoun's work for my formulation of this concept; her book *Feminism, The Family, and the Politics of the Closet: Feminism and Gay Displacement* has been of great value to this section in particular.

place that reduces lesbians' and gays' access to what she calls "basic social goods": rather, it "consists in the systematic *displacement* of gay men and lesbians to the outside of civil society so that gay men and lesbians have no legitimized place, not even a disadvantaged one...[this subordination] displaces gay and lesbian *identities* from the public sphere" (76, emphasis in original):

[L]esbians and gay men, unlike women and racial minorities, do not appear to be located in any particular social structural places...Although they constitute a social group, this does not translate into a statistical concentration in any particular socio-economic location. Second, it is possible to be unaware that gay men and lesbians are everywhere because the closet, coupled with the presumption that social actors are heterosexual, allows gay men and lesbians to circumvent the discriminatory practices designed to enable heterosexuals to avoid knowing any lesbians or gay men. (77)

In other words, lesbian and gay subordination, which ultimately results in the complete *erasure* of these identities from the public sphere,⁴² depends first upon the idea that lesbian and gay identity occurs across societies without any correlation to other aspects of identity (race, class, ethnic heritage, etc.), and it is thus impossible to point to a specific segment of people within a society that necessarily have any characteristics in common *other* than their sexual identity and recognize them as lesbian or gay. Second, this subordination relies on the ability of sexual orientation to be closeted; since society presumes heterosexual orientation in individuals until that presumption is actively dispelled, lesbians and gays are consequently able to avoid the material effects of

⁴² Duggan's conception of homonormativity and Jasbir Puar's homonationalism may seem to oppose this idea of erasure from the public sphere; both argue that gays and lesbians do create a kind of "public space" for themselves that either mimics heterosexist culture (Duggan) or creates a community that advances ideas of white superiority within the gay community (Puar). These concepts are not incompatible with Calhoun's displacement, however; even homonormative or homonationalist subsets of the gay/lesbian community are displaced from the heterosexist public sphere and marked out as different from it.

discrimination based on their sexual identity, provided that they *do not reveal or claim that identity in the public sphere*. This does not imply that claiming a gay or lesbian identity in the *private* sphere has no potential for negative consequences; rather, Calhoun argues that while the regulated public sphere is oppressive to gays and lesbians, the private sphere is *unprotected*. The public/private sphere divide is also not intended to create a dualistic opposition; it exists simply to point out that the subordination of gays and lesbians occurs in different ways in each area.

The parallels between lesbian and gay displacement and a similar “transgender displacement” may seem obvious, but I shall articulate them in detail, as they largely undergird my overall argument about gender as well as my deployment of film theory. Calhoun suggests that lesbian and gay displacement has two major features deserving examination within a heterosexist society (which even in its emphasis on sexual orientation displaces transgender identity as much as it does lesbian and gay identity, even for many of the same reasons); I shall paraphrase those features here, substituting “transgender” for “lesbian and gay,” including gender presentation as part of the required formula, and adding a third characteristic that I believe to be unique to transgender displacement:

(1) [I]n heterosexual [and two-gendered] society all citizens are required to adopt a real or pseudonymous heterosexual [and binary gender] identity as a condition of access to the public sphere, (2) heterosexual [and two-gendered] society gets reproduced generationally through legal, psychiatric, educational, and familial practices whose aim is to prevent future generations of [transgendered] people, and [(3) heterosexual and two-gendered society tends to deny the existence of non-binary gender identities by explaining these identities’ visual or behavioral signs away as

“deviations within the norm” or simply failing to acknowledge them at all, thus reinforcing the binary gender construct.] (82)

To illustrate this concept of displacement with a specific example, films with transsexual protagonists make explicit the requirement of adopting a heterosexual and binary gender identity in order to gain access to the public sphere: fulfilling this requirement is what the passing narrative is “all about.” Prevailing medical opinion in previous decades led doctors to suggest that both pre-op and post-op transsexuals geographically relocate as part of the transition process to avoid exposing the people who know them pre-transition to the potentially traumatic (for those other people) experience of witnessing the change itself.⁴³ Bree Osbourne, the MTF protagonist in *Transamerica*, works at home as a telemarketer during the pre-op phase of her transition, ostensibly to avoid the complications of negotiating a public-sphere workplace until she views herself as a “complete woman” (one who does not still possess male genitalia).

Even in her second job, where she does venture outside the confines of her home and into the public sphere, Bree is relegated to dishwasher status in the relatively privatized space of a Mexican restaurant kitchen. Although the narrative does not explicitly say so, the implication here is that Bree is deemed somehow “unsuitable” for direct interaction with customers but is given the most menial of manual labor jobs,

⁴³ This suggestion has long since been abandoned, as more recent medical professionals have realized that such a radical change often caused patients to give up on the transition process entirely. Current prevailing thought suggests that having a supportive and familiar community or family structure around them actually *helps* individuals through the “Real Life Experience” phase of their transition (Meyer et al 17). However, films that tend to stick closer to the binary gender system and passing narrative formulation generally depict characters transitioning in almost complete isolation from other people or begin their narratives nearer the end of the actual transition (*Transamerica*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*). Additionally, few of these films address the effects of the transition on people *other* than the protagonist; *Normal* is the only film examined in this project that does devote attention to this issue.

perhaps as a result of her employer's recognition of some degree of the difficulty of her life situation.⁴⁴ Bree's experience is of course not representative of all transgendered people; as I discussed in Chapter 1, many such individuals reject binary gender labels entirely and do not seek to inscribe themselves within that framework. However, the trope of passing in the film is illustrative of the first of Calhoun's two criteria for displacement.

As Marilyn Frye and Calhoun concur, "The pressure on each of us to guess or determine the sex of everybody else both generates and is exhibited in a great pressure on each of us to *inform* everybody all the time of our sex" (Frye 17). "Furthermore, in our social world the process of becoming gendered is part of the process of becoming a self, a subject, an 'I'. In short, speakers enter into the world of speech and expression as gendered subjects" (Calhoun 92). In this formulation, access to the "public sphere" within which individual subjects may speak is necessarily preceded by their apprehension of a coherent gender identity that they may then communicate, verbally or otherwise, to other people.

The reproduction of heterosexist norms within a society in the attempt to prevent future generations of transgendered people falls largely outside the scope of this discussion: the reproduction Calhoun describes occurs primarily within social institutions that are assumed to have direct power to act upon people and dictate the course of their lives (i.e., the law, the mental health profession, the educational system, the family as

⁴⁴ Chapter 3 will return to an explicit discussion of Bree's interactions with non-white characters, which are coded in a *radically* different manner than her interactions with white characters.

institution); virtually no individual person can escape the purview and influence of *all* of these institutions, while individual artifacts of popular culture may in many cases escape even the notice of a *majority* of individuals in a society.

However, I would argue that the very *lack* of popular culture texts depicting binary gender non-conformity suggests this culture's reluctance to consider it as a viable option.⁴⁵ This claim requires a foundation in psychiatric discourse: Calhoun suggests that modern psychiatry has attempted to "diagnose" homosexuality as early in life as possible (i.e., in childhood) with the idea that if apprehended early enough, such "gay tendencies" can be thwarted and such children might still mature into "fully functioning heterosexuals." Interestingly, at the same time that the American Psychological Association (APA) officially depathologized adult homosexuality (1973), it added to the DSM-III a new category of pathological condition termed Gender Identity Disorder of Childhood⁴⁶. Of note here is the fact that the very criteria used to arrive at such a diagnosis are linked not to *sexual* behavior, but to *gender* behavior, implying the connection I mentioned in Chapter 1 between cross-gender conduct (in children) and eventual homosexuality (in adults). With its titular emphasis on gender identity rather than sexual orientation, though, this diagnosis exemplifies my claim that by

⁴⁵ The limited array of options that do exist falls primarily outside the traditional media of literature and film; examples include modern video game narratives and some independent genres of fiction.

⁴⁶ Boys could be diagnosed with this condition if, in addition to expressing distress about being a boy, they displayed a "preoccupation with female stereotypical activities as manifested by a desire for either cross-dressing or simulating female attire, or by a compelling desire to participate in the games and pastimes of girls" (DSM-III 266). The revised edition, DSM-III-R, adds, "...and rejection of male stereotypical toys, games, and activities" (DSM-III-R 73). Girls were likewise susceptible if, in addition to expressing distress about being a girl, they showed a "persistent marked aversion to normative feminine clothing and insistence on wearing typical masculine clothing, e.g., boys' underwear and other accessories" (ibid.)

conceptualizing non-binary gender behaviors and identities as pathological, society thereby casts them as non-viable. This non-viability becomes apparent in the lack of transgender representation in popular culture artifacts explicitly *aimed* at the impressionable child and adolescent population; as B.J. Epstein points out in an article on this subject,

If someone recognizes at a young age that she or he is trans, that person might immediately want to know that she or he is not alone or "abnormal." The media and, more specifically, literature is usually the first stop. *Luna* and *Parrotfish* [young-adult novels with transgendered protagonists] are both for teenaged readers, but since we know that pre-teens, school-aged children, and even some pre-schoolers are recognizing that their psychological gender does not match their physical body, there ought to be some trans books for young readers, too. I am unfortunately aware of no texts about transgender characters for readers between five and twelve or so...

[T]here are [only] a couple of picture books, which at least can be used with children up until the age of five or six, regardless of whether they are themselves trans or know any trans people. Right now is a time when many transgender children are taunted or otherwise made to feel uncomfortable at school, when they consider or attempt suicide, or when they see no hope for the future. I believe that featuring trans and intersex characters in literature for young people can help to change this. (Epstein, "Dreaming of Dresses")

Calhoun cites the abundance of such cultural forms that facilitate gender-normative and heterosexual adult development, asserting that

[institutionalized heterosexuality] needs prohibitions against both category-crossing (e.g., against crossdressing, effeminacy in men, mannishness in women) and against non-heterosexual desire...[and] social institutions and practices that support sex/gender dimorphism and heterosexual desire – gendered rites of passage...gendered dress...heterosexual erotica and pornography... (45-6)

In contrast, no such body of mass literature or society-wide institutions exist that support *other* kinds of sex/gender combinations and *non*-heterosexual desire, suggesting once again the dominant cultural belief that such phenomena need not be encouraged. This may be a paradoxical feature of minoritized gender/sexual identities: by the very act of achieving status as a “mass” body of literature, such texts might tend toward homonormativity by suggesting that there is “one way” to be transgendered, gay, or lesbian, that bears a great deal of similarity to heterosexist norms; I certainly would not suggest such an approach as a solution to the Othering of transgender identity. However, I raise the issue of transgender literature’s relatively small presence to emphasize the degree to which this identity continues to be displaced from the cultural mainstream.⁴⁷

The third feature of transgender displacement that I mentioned above, its tendency to deny the existence of non-binary gender identities, figures prominently in the majority of my film analyses. I shall argue, borrowing from Calhoun and Marjorie Garber, that many transgender film characters are looked “*through*, rather than *at*” because of other film characters’ (or *critics*’) desire to “subsume that figure within one of the two traditional genders” (Garber 9). This “underestimation of the object” that Garber calls the “third sex” and I referred to in Chapter 1 has an effect of erasure that parallels Calhoun’s idea of displacement; this third sex can “be thus assimilated to either the male or female pole of the hypothetical gender binarism: in either case, it disappears” (10). The

⁴⁷ For additional examples of transgender-themed pop culture texts to those I mention here, see “I’m Here. I’m Queer. What the Hell Do I Read?” *leewind.org* 25 March 2012 <<http://www.leewind.org/search/label/Queer%20%28Gender%20Non-Conforming%29%20Teen%20Characters%2FThemes>> and “Booklist for Trans Youth” *goodreads.com* 25 March 2012 <http://www.goodreads.com/list/show/11446.Booklist_for_Trans_Youth>.

motivation to erase the existence of a third term in relation to the binary gender system arises from the fact that it is “not a term” at all, with its lack of specificity and defining parameters. Rather, the third is a

mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility (11)...The third deconstructs the binary of self and other that was itself a comfortable, because commutable and thus controllable, fiction of complementarity. But – or and – it is not itself *a third one*; it is rather something that challenges the possibility of harmoniousness and stable binary symmetry. (12)

In queer theory terms, the “third” is potentially problematic: even as it functions as an identifier attempting to define phenomena that fall outside traditional binaries, the third can itself become meaningless in the amount of diversity it attempts to encompass under a single term.

Homi Bhaba⁴⁸ discusses the potential use of the term “hybridity,” which is often used to denote a mixed racial status that is simultaneously “both and neither,” to resolve such ambiguity, ultimately concluding that the term must be carefully applied to avoid further oversimplification:

[T]he problem is that it ... becomes (at least potentially) generalizable to the point where it loses any political import that it may originally have had ... a problem, which, ... is also apparent in the use of the term queer ... [to describe] anything or anyone considered to be ‘non-normative.’ Thus Bhaba argues for an understanding of hybridity as a strategy or a practice which in various ways establishes space(s) for being neither ... Self nor ... Other. (Sullivan 73)

To digress briefly from this subject and invoke Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, within the second order of the human psyche, known as the Imaginary, the individual’s

⁴⁸ Homi Bhaba, “The Other Question,” *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Padmini Mongia, (London and New York: Arnold, 1996) 37-54.

relation to himself and to other people is structured like and by his relation to his own image in a mirror, a dyadic, symmetrical complementarity based upon the *fiction* of a stable identity or wholeness that the mirror itself creates by equating the concept of “self” with a visible image. The third, Symbolic order forces the human subject out of this dyadic relation involving only himself and the mirror and into a wider social network that involves both one-to-one dyads and what Garber terms “immersion in the codes and constraints of culture ... [that] involves moving from a structure of complementarity or symmetry to a contextualization, in which what once stood as an exclusive dual relation becomes an element in a larger chain” (12).

The non-binary gender identity, then, is inherently threatening to the individual’s very psychic development because it “reconfigures the relationships between the original pair, and puts in question identities previously conceived as stable, unchallengeable, grounded, and ‘known’” (13). Rather than adjusting his perceived definitions of gender terms, which have thus far structured his entire relationship to the outside world⁴⁹, the individual finds it much easier to simply ignore or deny the new data, clinging vociferously to his previously-held conceptions.

A number of the films I examine contain scenes where transgressions of binary gender norms incite reactions ranging from feigned ignorance of their occurrence to outright denial of their validity as expressive of transgender identity. For example, upon detecting the scent of women’s perfume when in close physical proximity to him, Roy’s

⁴⁹ Calhoun, among others, states this centrality explicitly, describing gender as a “fundamentally constitutive feature of our social world and of the persons who inhabit it...[it] pervades the entire personality and orients persons in the social world” (93).

coworkers in *Normal* attribute the smell to an extramarital [heterosexual] affair that Roy has simply not yet revealed to them, rather than acknowledging his performance of cross-gender behavior. In the 1982 comedy *Tootsie*, Michael Dorsey's ongoing "disguise" of himself as the female actress Dorothy Michaels receives no acknowledgement at all, other than his agent's flippant comment that "there's something weird about [him]; since when does [he] care so much about how other people feel?" as his behavior seems to adapt to the gender identity that begun as merely a functional ruse. An obvious explanation for this lack of disclosure to the film world would be that it would bring about an abrupt end to the narrative, and the needs of the plot dictate that the ruse continue, at least for a while. However, the fact that the Dorothy persona is repeatedly presented *as a costume*, a "putting on" of gender, subtly communicates the errant nature of other characters' (or the audience's) assumption that Michael's cross-dressing is in *any way* reflective of a non-binary gender *identity*.

2.4. Making Film 'Perfectly Queer': Textuality and Reception Theory

As with the "performance" of film theory (or gender identity) in general, scholars agree that no "one way" exists to "perform" the queering of popular culture; as Nikki Sullivan argues in *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, "[T]here is no single correct way to queer popular culture. Rather, the queering of popular culture has taken multifarious forms, has focused on different issues, and has drawn on a range of

theoretical positions, often to contradictory or conflicting ends” (189). Rather than questions of methodology or praxis, what is said to be at stake in queering pop culture artifacts like film is the potential implication of this practice of seeing anew. Like some branches of transgender studies, queer theory foregrounds issues of subjectivity or subject position: it is based on the assumption that any viewing of a text is not a passive, but very much an *active* process, the reader/viewer necessarily bringing to that reading a full complement of existing knowledge, a complex collection of interlocking social identities and life experiences, and potentially even some variably cohesive array of political/ideological beliefs about the world at large.

Drawing on the theory of textuality posited by Roland Barthes⁵⁰, among others, Sullivan suggests that

[w]e are never simply consumers of popular culture texts, but in and through our very ‘reading’ of them we actively (re)create them... We are always, as Foucault would claim, implicated in the production of meaning and identity, and hence are both agents and effects of systems of power/knowledge. (189)

Thus, the process of queering is enacted at the level of the individual subject (and then potentially to the audience of *that* subject, if s/he passes a particular interpretation or reading on to other audiences) and involves the critical examination of the ways in which meaning and/or identity are “(inter)textually (re)produced” (190). I will restrict my discussion of queering popular culture to the approach commonly termed reception theory, which bell hooks examines in her book *Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the*

⁵⁰ See Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in Rice and Waugh, eds., *Modern Literary Theory*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1990) 114-118; *The Pleasure of the Text*, Miller, trans., (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994); S/Z, Miller, trans., (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

Movies;⁵¹ the examination of how film texts are received and interpreted by their viewers lies closest to the approach my film analyses will adopt.⁵²

Theorizing in terms of audience or textual reception can be useful in that it examines the ways in which an audience receives, and then responds to, the texts it encounters: this approach imagines the film text not as a static object, produced and extant within some cultural “vacuum,” but as a living, breathing cultural artifact that allows individuals of varied and interconnected identities to interact with and interpret it, and then to participate in the creation and perpetuation of its meaning. Depending upon the particular composition of this theoretical audience, this meaning can take on manifold and even unexpected dimensions. The most significant potential weakness of the reception approach, however, is its tendency to homogenize or essentialize the audience groups that it necessarily creates as part of its process.

Many such studies have been conducted to explore the reactions of different groups to the same text(s), such as men’s and women’s responses to pornographic magazines, black and white women’s reactions to films or sitcoms featuring varying types of black characters, or so-called housewives’ (identified by the studies’ authors as women belonging to a certain age or social class) reactions to daytime television soap operas. Such studies tend, by nature of their construction, to assume identical or at least highly similar responses from all members of a given audience grouping, when Sullivan

⁵¹ (New York and London: Routledge, 1996).

⁵² Sullivan outlines four possible approaches to queering pop culture, including the aforementioned reception theory, theories of the filmic “gaze,” ideas and practices of camp, and finally, what she labels “a sort of guerilla tactics” (190).

and others suggest that such homogeneity of thought in any large group of people is simply unlikely to exist (190). This same assumed homogeneity is what I argue against in filmic representation of transgender: many of the films I discuss duplicate this notion that all individuals belonging to a certain group (in this case, the transgender community) are basically identical and/or interchangeable with one another, eliminating the plurality that this identity can display in real life and potentially creating perpetual misrepresentations of that which may initially be unknown to the audience.

In contrast to this assumption of audience homogeneity, I follow the approach of Alexander Doty, a scholar of both film/mass culture and gay/lesbian studies. In his 1993 book *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, Doty asserts that

[T]he queerness of mass culture develops in three areas: (1) influences during the production of texts, (2) historically specific cultural readings and uses of texts by self-identified gays, lesbians, bisexuals, queers; and (3) adopting reception positions that can be considered 'queer' in some way, regardless of a person's declared sexual and gender allegiances. (xi)

In this conception of queering the (film) text, external context takes precedence over simple formalism, and texts acquire meaning or are marked as queer not necessarily through their inherent content, but through the interpretive work that is done *on* them, by either the texts' authors or their audiences. Like Doty, I conceive of queerness not as an exclusive category, but an inclusive one, designed not to keep certain individuals out, but to allow as many as possible to fit *in*. I largely adopt Judith Butler and Sue-Ellen Case's argument, cited in Doty's first chapter, that,

queerness is something that is ultimately beyond gender – it is an attitude, a way of responding, that begins in a place not concerned with, or limited

by, notions of a binary opposition of male and female or the homo versus hetero paradigm usually articulated as an expression of this gender binarism.⁵³

Queerness (or the marking of it) is in a general sense, then, an attempt to “challenge and break apart conventional categories, not to become one itself” (Doty xv); the transgender community, among others, is specifically mentioned as a group perceived to occupy the spaces between binary oppositions:

I...question the cultural demarcations between the queer and the straight...by pointing out the queerness of...individuals and groups who have been told they inhabit the boundaries between the binaries of gender and sexuality: transsexuals, bisexuals, transvestites, and other binary outlaws. Therefore, when I use the terms ‘queer’ or ‘queerness’ as adjectives or nouns, I do so to suggest a range of nonstraight expression in, or in response to, mass culture. This range includes specifically gay, lesbian, and bisexual expressions; but it also includes all other potential (and potentially unclassifiable) nonstraight positions. (xvi)

The practice of queering film seeks to ferret out and acknowledge the “queer elements” that can occur within relatively heterosexist⁵⁴ texts and the “queer moments” that can be experienced within them by generally heterosexual, straight-identifying individuals. This task does not aim to repress, ignore, or dismiss the specter of queerness, but to embrace it as an omnipresent component of even the seemingly straightest of cultural artifacts.

⁵³ See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990); “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York and London: Routledge, 1991) 13-31; and Sue-Ellen Case, “Tracking the Vampire,” *differences* 3:2 (1991): 1-20.

⁵⁴ Calhoun defines this term as

An interlocking set of practices built on the distinction between what appear to be basic identities – heterosexual versus gay and lesbian – whose effect is the pervasive reduction of lesbian and gay life chances, self-determination, political status, physical safety, and control over cultural products...Heterosexism appears to be part of a broader array of interlocking practices built on the distinction between the identities “man” and “woman” (6)...Heterosexism depends on treating masculine-male-heterosexual and feminine-female-heterosexual as the only natural and nondefective sex/genders. (39)

2.5. Queer Moments: New Queer Cinema and Transgender in Film

Even before queer film theory gained solid momentum as a distinct field of academic inquiry, queer representations themselves were beginning to appear in films across the nation and the globe: in American cinema a wave of overtly queer films with overtly queer themes and characters swept the film festival circuit in the early 1990s, giving rise to film theorist B. Ruby Rich's categorization and chronicle of this group of movies, for which she coined the collective term "New Queer Cinema." Michele Aaron's 2004 edited volume of the same name traces the history of New Queer Cinema as a distinct movement, highlighting some of its characteristic films⁵⁵, and offering thoughts on how these efforts departed from the traditions of more mainstream Hollywood projects. Although the collection confines its discussion to films representing only a brief period of American film history, Rich's "NQC" remains highly useful to this research in that its characterization of the films closely resembles the qualities I will ascribe to the films in Chapters 3 and 4: Rich herself described NQC films as "irreverent" and "energetic," J. Hoberman called their protagonists "proudly assertive" (qtd. in Aaron 3), and Aaron binds the films together because of their shared aesthetic of "defiance."

To expand this rather general concept of defiance, Aaron outlines five main ways in which NQC films disrupt conventions, two of which seem more relevant than the

⁵⁵ In the volume's introduction, Aaron cites various films from 1991-92 as representative examples of NQC; the list includes *Paris Is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1990, examined at length in Chapter 5 of this dissertation), *Poison* (Todd Haynes, 1991), *Swoon* (Tom Kalin, 1992), *Tongues Untied* (Marlon Riggs, 1990), *My Own Private Idaho* (Gus van Sant, 1991), *Young Soul Rebels* (Isaac Julien, 1991), *R.S.V.P.* (Laurie Lynd, 1991), *Edward II* (Derek Jarman, 1991), *Khush* (Pratihba Parmar, 1991), *The Hours and Times* (Christopher Munsch, 1991), and *The Living End* (Gregg Araki, 1992), as well as films by Sadie Benning, Cecilia Dougherty, Su Friedrich, John Greyson, and Monica Treut.

others to this dissertation; I will thus only discuss these two at length.⁵⁶ First, Aaron asserts that the films of NQC oppose established tradition in their choice of subjects: “[T]hese films give voice to the marginalized not simply in terms of focusing on the lesbian and gay community, but on the sub-groups contained within it” (3-4). In other words, these films do not opt for the simple representation of individuals who might be perceived as “straight in every way but one.” Examples of these individuals might be gay or lesbian characters who adopt most or all of Lisa Duggan’s definition of homonormativity, indistinguishable from straight (white, middle-to-upper-class) mainstream culture in every way but their choice of sex partners, or transgendered characters who *are* able to pass within the bounds of binary gender and fly beneath the radar of heterosexist and gender-dimorphic social policing.⁵⁷ A notable example of such deliberately transgressive subject choice is Jennie Livingston’s documentary *Paris Is Burning*, which examines drag ball culture, an amalgam of gay, Latino, young adult, and male culture in New York City, a community whose marginalization is readily apparent as a subgroup (cross-dressing male-bodied participants in drag culture) within a subgroup (gay men) within a subgroup (Latino youth).

Aaron’s second characteristic of NQC is the films’ habit of being “unapologetic about their characters’ faults, or rather, crimes: they eschew positive imagery. *Swoon*,

⁵⁶ Aaron’s other three descriptors of NQC are the films’ tendencies to defy “the sanctity of the past, especially the homophobic past,” “cinematic conventions in terms of form, content, and genre,” and “in many ways...death” (4-5).

⁵⁷ See Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24:2 *Intimacy* (1998): 547-566; Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Perverse Modernities) (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

Poison, and *The Living End* beautify the criminal and (homo)eroticize violence” (4).

These films explicitly labeled as NQC feature protagonists whose actions seem obviously deviant, or at the very least impermissible, by standards of law or social taboos, but this general aesthetic of celebrating alleged deviance is certainly evident in queer films featuring characters who are not actually criminals or perpetrators of criminal behavior. For example, the now-iconic independent film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, rather than bemoaning the hero(ine)’s surgically mangled genitals and her in-between sexual status, adopts both as sites of resistance, fighting back in an overt, often campy fashion against the patriarchal systems of immigration policy and binary gender norms that attempt to restrict or confine the heroine rather than allowing her to express her own agency.

Finally, Aaron situates NQC as “an art-full manifestation of the overlap” between critical intervention, cultural product, and political strategy (6), motivated in part by a desire for “flirtation with non-fixity,” and in part by the very real and tangible threat to the queer community at large of the AIDS epidemic, from whose context Aaron suggests that NQC cannot be removed. Resulting from a generalized desire in the cultural marketplace of the 1990s for increased fluidity in various categories of identity, NQC’s “figure *par excellence*” was the transsexual:

[T]he decade saw the publication of work on the subject by the ‘community’s’ quasi leaders, Kate Bornstein and Leslie Feinberg. It would also see the use of Del la Grace Volcano’s transgendered images in an episode of *Sex and the City* and climax in the major success of Kimberley Peirce’s *Boys Don’t Cry*, which told Brandon Teena/Teena Brandon’s short-life-story, in 1999. (6)

Transgender represents the ultimate manifestation of non-fixity in terms of both gender and sexuality, the transgender individual him/herself being nearly impossible to “pin down” employing a strictly heterocentric matrix of definition.

What is perhaps most important to bear in mind concerning NQC, especially in preparation to examine a body of film theory we might label as explicitly *transgender* film theory, is its relationship to both the mainstream and the gay culture that is popularly assumed to function in opposition to it. As a term of political agency, queer’s defiance opposes not only mainstream homophobic ideals, *but also* the “tasteful and tolerated” gay culture that exists alongside them (Smyth 48); the early 1990s saw some of the strongest opposition to queer cinema within the *gay* community, not the mainstream, straight one. To conclude this discussion of queer cinema in general, and New Queer Cinema in particular, I will offer a final thought from Aaron’s conception of what it takes to make a film both “queer,” and “there”:

Queer is not just about gender and sexuality, but the restrictiveness of the rules governing them and their intersections with other aspects of identity. To be really queerly there is to apprehend ‘the complexity of what actually happens “*between*” *the contingent spaces* where each variable [race, class, gender] intersects with the others.’⁵⁸ (7, emphasis added)

2.6. “The Sex That Is Both”: Gender-Mixing and Erotic Fascination

As I alluded to in Chapter 1, a major component of transphobic sentiment in this culture is its perceived disruption of codes of sexuality, which dominant discourse indicates must be identifiable as either heterosexual and homosexual, with heterosexual

⁵⁸ Kobena Mercer, “Skin Head Sex Thing,” in Bad Object Choices, (eds), *How Do I Look?* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991) 193.

acts possessing higher hierarchical status. Scholars have altered their overall views of the connection between gender and sexuality over time; for example, Gayle Rubin argued in her 1974 essay “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex” that “sex as we know it – gender identity, sexual desire and fantasy, concepts of childhood – is itself a social product” (166), drawing no distinction between gender and lust/desire. However, she revised her position in a later essay, “Thinking Sex: Notes for A Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality”:

It appeared to me at the time that gender and desire were systematically intertwined in such social formations. This may or may not be an accurate assessment of the relationship between sex and gender in tribal organizations. But it is surely not an adequate formulation for sexuality in Western industrial societies...In contrast to my perspective in “The Traffic in Women,” I am now arguing that it is essential to separate gender and sexuality analytically to more accurately reflect their separate social existence. This goes against the grain of much contemporary feminist thought, which treats sexuality as a derivation of gender...But as issues become less those of gender and more those of sexuality, feminist analysis becomes misleading and often irrelevant. Feminist thought simply lacks angles of vision which can fully encompass the social organization of sexuality. (307-9)

Judith Butler concurs with Rubin’s later analysis, asserting that “[t]here are no direct expressive or causal lines between sex, gender, gender presentation, sexual practice, fantasy and sexuality. None of those terms captures or determines the rest” (1993: 315). In other words, Rubin and Butler, among others, have argued that no causal or derivative relationship exists between a person’s gender and his/her sexuality; sexual desire and the deployment of that desire might operate entirely independently from psychological gender identity.

This issue becomes even more complicated when considered in individuals whose gender identity does not conform to the standard male/female binary. Early theorists of gay and lesbian sexuality based their definitions of sexual orientation on some stable sense of what the gender categories underlying them meant; for example, in 1978, Monique Wittig uttered the now-infamous claim that “lesbians are not women,” a statement that inspired a wealth of theorizing on both sides of the debate. Diane Griffin Crowder⁵⁹ and Calhoun, whose work I have already mentioned, both endorsed Wittig’s assertion, though providing different rationales for their argument for lesbians’ status as “not-women” than Wittig did. If sexual orientation as a functional concept cannot exist without stable definitions for the categories describing both the sexually desiring individual and the object of that desire, then transgender sexuality becomes a complex issue from both directions: that of the transgender individual who is assumed to have some particular sexual orientation toward one or more particular types of gendered people, and that of the cisgendered individual who encounters the transgendered person as a potential object of sexual appeal.

If the categorization of sexuality can be assumed to have some “purpose” or justification, we might identify that purpose as the determination of potential sexual and/or romantic partners; since Freud’s discussions of the human sex, life, and death drives, Western culture has assumed the desire for sexual relationships to be a fundamental component of adult human development. This assumption also implies a

⁵⁹ Diane Griffin Crowder, “Lesbians and the (Re/De) Construction of the Female Body,” *Reading the Social Body*, ed. Catherine B. Burroughs and Jeffrey David Ehrenreich (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993) 66.

universality of sexual desire that may not actually exist in every adult individual across the globe, but the centrality of the intimate relationship in various artifacts of culture throughout history certainly demonstrates its appeal to at least a *majority* of people. One of the earliest advocates for transgender people, Magnus Hirschfeld, specifically addressed the question of “marital suitability” of those people he referred to as transvestites, apparently believing that such a non-binary gender identity was significantly related to a person’s ability to sustain a long-term sexual relationship. Even more significant than the relationship itself, though, was the question of the children that might result from such a union; Hirschfeld himself expressed uncertainty about the “fitness” of transvestites to be parents:

Raising children today demands one have nerves of steel. Transvestites who want to raise children must be physically healthy and strong as well as mentally well-developed persons. They must be careful with their choice of marriage partners because of the children. Moreover, I would be against transvestite women marrying. They are mostly very restless spirits, inclined toward adventure, and find it difficult to chain themselves to domestic duties. In fact, most suitable would be – which is in accordance with the wishes of these persons – a transvestite man and a somewhat manly kind of woman, who naturally need not be a transvestite, or a transvestite woman to a womanly man, so that...”The degree of his manliness corresponds to the degree of her womanliness”; to be sure, it would be more correct to say in our case the degree of her manliness to the degree of his womanliness. (1910: 39)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the concern about people with alternative gender and sexual identities’ ability to sustain intimate relationships and raise children remains a heavily debated issue today: homosexual marriage continues to figure into many contemporary political platforms, and Calhoun devotes two entire chapters of her book to the argument that “the most important liberty to secure for lesbians and gays [and, I would argue,

transgendered individuals] is equal definitional authority to say what counts as a marriage or a family” (106).⁶⁰ Bree expresses this sentiment aloud in *Transamerica* during a particularly vexing moment in the narrative, sobbing to her therapist over the phone that she “doesn’t think she’s cut out to be a mother.”

To return to the specific issue of sexual desire and behavior, I would like to suggest that transphobic responses stem from cisgendered people’s inability to classify transgendered people in a sexual sense as either included within, or excluded from, the type of gendered persons to whom they (cisgendered people) tend to be sexually attracted. In a chapter from *Transgender on Screen*, Phillips explores the recent phenomenon of transsexual pornography on the Internet, arguing among other points that “what troubles gays [and perhaps, most everyone else] is that their very existence threatens the notion of fixed and specific sexual orientations... The pre-op transsexual is a model of gender subversion” (149-51). Interestingly, much of Phillips’ discussion (and virtually *all* existing pornography featuring transsexuality) focuses on the image of the MTF transsexual; it seems there is simply something *more threatening* (and, simultaneously, more *appealing*, as evidenced by MTF pornography’s current status as one of the largest porn genres in existence) about the so-called “chick with a dick” than

⁶⁰ There is, of course, a large presence within both the gay and the straight community that opposes this argument, suggesting that the elimination of *all* state-sanctioned marriage would do more to facilitate gay equality than the legalization of gay marriage, and/or that the privileging of the heterosexist concept of the “nuclear family” reinforces gay and lesbian subordination.

the more abstract idea of the “man with a pussy,” an image with almost *no* cultural representation.⁶¹

Phillips suggests that this threat has multiple origins, the first of which is a response within feminism itself to the “phallic focus” of such films, in which

[t]he pre-op transsexual simultaneously embodies and invites keeps both viewing subject and viewed object trapped in a phallicist economy that is politically unacceptable to those feminist and lesbian groups seeking to transcend phallogocentrism⁶² to achieve what Judith Butler calls a “postgenital sexuality” (see Butler, 1999: 39)⁶³. Transsexual pornography is typically constructed around a number of binary oppositions that might be seen as reinforcing and reflecting the male-female binarism of heterosexist culture. (150)

Indeed, such a sentiment is easy to detect in feminist work that expresses strong suspicion of transsexuality, like Laura Kipnis’s book-length study of American pornography⁶⁴ and Janice Raymond’s scathing critique of transsexuality⁶⁵ that is credited by many as the single text that most inspired the academic field of transgender studies. In general, such

⁶¹ According to a recent article in the *San Francisco Examiner*,

Buck Angel, known as the “Man With a Pussy,” seems to be the only well known FtM in porn. On his blog he even refers to himself as “the first and only FtM transsexual pornstar.” Angel’s goal is to bring FtM porn into the mainstream as a legitimate genre and not as a “freak show.” In 2007 he won Transsexual Performer of the Year at the AVN Awards. He was the first trans male performer to do so...A friend who recently got a job reviewing porn websites commented that she’s “never seen any trans men porn stars except on user uploaded X-Tube, and Buck Angel.” (Marloff 2009)

⁶² “Phallicist” and “phallogocentrism” are terms derived from Freudian psychoanalysis and Derridean post-structuralism that indicate a male orientation in Western linguistic and cultural expressions.

⁶³ See Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

⁶⁴ Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (New York: Grive Press, 1996).

⁶⁵ Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1979); re-issued with a new introduction on transgender (New York: Teacher’s College Press, 1994).

texts suggest that transsexual pornography is inherently coded as “masculine” due to the centrality in the diegesis of the penetrating phallus.

Another perceived “danger” of the MTF transgender figure is the uncertainty she can create in the viewer about the viewer’s *own* gender and sexual identities:

[T]he ‘chick with a dick’ inspires fear in some, precisely because (s)he is worryingly, perilously impossible to classify in normative categories of gender/sex/sexuality. If, as Luce Irigaray claims,⁶⁶ woman is the sex that is not one, the pre-op transsexual is the sex that is both, an overdetermined gender cluster that Janus-like faces simultaneously into the masculine and the feminine...More than any other identity category, the shemale represents the possibility of the liberation of both gender and desire from binary or fixed norms...If this form...is simultaneously exciting and disturbing, it is in part because the phallic woman that the transsexual represents challenges the fixity of our own sexual identity.

It may go without saying that this challenge is particularly problematic for the viewer who is both biologically male and self-identified as heterosexual; much transsexual pornography is marketed to and consumed by precisely this target audience, but even in its suggestion that such straight men “try the best of both worlds,” it denigrates the notion of homosexual desire: “[T]he positioning of the male viewer as a ‘curious heterosexual’ reinforces homophobia by implying the undesirability of the homosexual position” (Phillips 155). The straight man is therefore reassured of his “straightness” even as he experiences arousal at the sight of another penis, perpetuating the idea that penis = maleness, and the transsexual woman as a real object of desire (in real life, as opposed to in pornography, which by its very nature is coded as fantasy and *not* a reflection of real life) is therefore sexually “off-limits.”

⁶⁶ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

As may be noted, none of the films I examine in Chapters 3 and 4 can be classified as pornographic films; none of them even contain scenes of explicitly sexual nudity. However, I would argue that the notion of “concealing and revealing” that Phillips describes as central to much transsexual pornography is equally present in the films I discuss, though in a slightly different context, and generally with a much less positive reaction, from the male characters who do the discovering in particular.

2.7. Transgender Theory and Film: An Under-examined Relationship

Few book-length studies have been published that examine transgender within the realm of film or literature. I will briefly discuss several of those here and explain how my work, and ideally the present and future work of other scholars, continues and expands the scholarship already published. It is notable that a number of works specifically focusing on cross-dressing have appeared in the last two decades, while comparatively little has been written on other forms of transgender; three of these studies of cross-dressing feature photographs of male-bodied people dressing in drag in film but offer little in the way of critical analysis of this phenomenon.⁶⁷

Several books address cross-dressing in a more analytical fashion, including Rebecca Bell-Metereau’s *Hollywood Androgyny* (1993), which even as it examines cross-dressing, does not address transgender identity itself as a site of potential political transformation; *Cross-Dressing, Sex, and Gender* by Bonnie and Vern L. Bulloughs

⁶⁷ See Homer Dickens, *What a Drag: Men as Women and Women as Men in the Movies* (William Morrow & Co., 1984); J.C. Suarès, *Hollywood Drag* (Lickle Publishing Inc, 1994); and Jean-Louis Ginibre, *Ladies or Gentlemen: A Pictorial History of Male Cross-Dressing in the Movies* (Filipacchi Publishing, 2005).

(1993), which focuses more on cross-dressing in antiquity and the medical, biological, psychological, and sociological findings of scientific literature on cross-dressing than it does on popular culture *per se*; Marjorie Garber's *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (1997), which explores the cultural impact of the cross-dressing figure and cross-dressing's interconnections with recognition of female power and androgyny, responses to gay identity, and anxiety over economic or cultural dislocations; and *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing* edited by Lesley Ferris (1993), which does not address film at all, but provides a comprehensive examination of the performative aspects of cross-dressing in theater, opera, and dance.

Texts containing chapters or sections on cross-dressing include *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* by Stella Bruzzi (1997), with two chapters on the narrative functionality of cross-dressing, "The Comedy of Cross-Dressing" and "The Erotic Strategies of Androgyny"; James Keller's *Queer (Un)Friendly Film and Television* (2002), which discusses the film *Flawless* in its chapter "Rehabilitating the Camera: Loquacious Queens and Male Autism in *Flawless*"; Parker Tyler's *Screening the Sexes: Homosexuality in the Movies* (1993), which offers limited information on cross-dressers and transsexuals; and Chris Straayer's *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-Orientation in Film and Video* (1996), which offers two chapters on cross-dressing and transgender, "'Re-Dressing the Natural': The Temporary Transvestite Film" and "The She-Man: Post-Modern Bi-Sexed Performance in Film and Video," as well as a useful chapter on the intersections of feminist and queer theory, "Queer Theory, Feminist Theory: Grounds for Rhetorical Figures."

In 1992, Leslie Feinberg pronounced transgender liberation a “movement whose time [had] come”; the twenty-first century’s first decade might be viewed similarly as ushering in another such “movement”: the early 2000’s saw the arrival of the first book-length studies of transgender as an inclusive, non-limiting field of identity, works that examined non-binary gender presentation in popular culture as a phenomenon created by the alchemy of (popular) cultural norms and the politics of representation. Two such texts with which I align myself closely are Judith Halberstam’s *In A Queer Time and Place* (2005) and John Phillips’ *Transgender on Screen* (2006). While Halberstam’s book examines transgender through a slightly wider lens, incorporating discussions of its meaning and manifestation in both real-life society and the distinct milieus of fiction, visual art, film, and popular music, and Phillips restricts his analysis only to film, both authors take what might be termed a more postmodern approach to transgender than scholars before them in their description of how representations of transgender are simultaneously a product of and influence on the cultures within which they are created.

Halberstam offers the concepts of “queer time” and “queer space” as formulations that develop “at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction” (1); she suggests that when such queer constructs are viewed as the outcome of various types of “strangeness” within human lives, queerness itself becomes “detached from sexual identity” and serves instead to “mark out the particularity and indeed the *menace* of [queer] life” (1, emphasis added).⁶⁸ Thus, queerness draws attention

⁶⁸ Freeman also addresses the relationship between temporality and queerness, examining the works of artists who “suggest ways of putting the past into meaningful, transformative relation with the present”

from the mainstream contingent because of its inherent radical possibilities for new ways of doing and being, many of which directly oppose the most central tenets of heterocentric culture.⁶⁹ Halberstam draws an analogy between Mark Seltzer's work on America's "wound culture"⁷⁰ and queer subjectivity, positing the notion that Seltzer's "formulation of the psychological experience of trauma as a belated or retrospective construction of the physical experience of violation" may help explain why transgender or homosexual victims of violence inspire such outpourings of cultural sorrow and ostensible identification with these appointed "martyrs," who "stand in for the hurts and indignities that are so often rendered invisible by the peculiar closet structure of homophobia" (16). We might apply this idea to filmic representations of transgendered people who meet violent demises (Brandon Teena in *Boys Don't Cry*, for example) and reach the conclusion that part of these films' appeal lies in the audience's ability to cast the characters in the role of symbolic victims of *all* anti-queer violence, rather than the perceived validity of the films' portrayals of transgender.

Halberstam's stated objective in the text is to "keep transgenderism alive as a meaningful designator of unpredictable gender identities and practices" (19), a desire that likely stems from her belief in the transgender body as "futurity itself, a kind of heroic fulfillment of postmodern promises of gender flexibility" (18). This conception relies on

through the use of what she terms "queer asynchronies." Throughout her book, Freeman emphasizes the importance to queer politics of actively critiquing both temporality and history.

⁶⁹ See also Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Series Q) (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁷⁰ See Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in American Wound Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

the perception of that body as a flesh-and-blood manifestation of non-binarism, fluidity, flexibility, the so-called “post-gender world” imagined to exist by many young gays and lesbians, or the “successful outcome of years of gender activism” (21). Throughout her chapters on transgender in film, Halberstam remains true to her aforementioned commitment to politicizing transgender identity as a potential site of transformation,

locat[ing] the transgender figure as a central player in numerous postmodern debates about space and sexuality, subcultural production, rural gender roles, art and gender ambiguity, the politics of biography, historical conceptions of manhood, gender and genre, and the local as opposed to the global. (21)

Thus, her book takes the next theoretical step in the discussion of transgender, taking it beyond issues of simple representation and examining what those representations both *say* and *mean* about contemporary American culture as a whole.

Phillips’ book, in contrast, restricts its examination of transgender to cinematic texts; he begins by stating the gap he perceived in transgender studies of film prior to this volume’s publication, dubbing it the “first detailed study of screen representations of transgender” (1), and ascribing to it the following list of objectives:

- * To demonstrate that perceptions of transgender are mediated by culturally constructed images.
- * To explore these cultural representations of transvestism and transsexuality in modern (late twentieth-century) screen media (film, Internet), against the historical background of the evolution of such representations.
- * To identify and account for the ambivalence that underlies the depiction of transgender in modern film.
- * To reposition and redefine sexual desire against sexual fascination with transgender. (1)

Like Halberstam, Phillips aims to explore media's ability to mediate, or have some tangible effect upon, general public perceptions of transgender, at least making the *suggestion* that such a connection exists. He also aligns himself with Garber, praising *Vested Interests* as a "notable exception" to prior texts that he says give insufficient attention to transgender's significance to the "wider debates around gender and sexuality" (2). Despite his complimentary stance toward Garber's work, he distinguishes his own book from hers by asserting that his analysis takes a wider methodological approach, examining transsexuality as distinct from transvestism, a thread of scholarship that Garber declines to pick up.

The central component of Phillips' hypothesis is the idea that "the crossing of genders...will prove to be the most significant single cultural challenge in the first decades of the new millennium, largely because of the redefinition of sexes and sexualities that necessarily accompanies it"; Phillips suggests that these redefinitions are leading the way toward a widespread and new conception of the self as increasingly *defined in terms of* the images reflected back to that self by popular culture (4, emphasis added). Drawing an explicit link to postmodernism and the inward and outward referentiality such texts are assumed to possess, Phillips calls his study a "postmodern perspective" on the concepts of representation and the "real," in that he views the imaginary and the real as increasingly the *same thing*, citing popular culture's

increasing elision between the representation of reality and reality itself (if indeed that distinction still has meaning or value)...as the imaginary and the real move ever closer together...'postmodern' increasingly describes society itself and not simply the art it produces...For our dependence on

messages is a refuge from the real in representation, or rather, it generates situations in which the representation *is* the real. At the very least, like a nervous actor who is lost without a script, reality takes its cue from representation. (28)

Phillips traces the course of this “elision” through human cultural history, beginning with representations of bisexuality, the androgyne, and the hermaphrodite in antiquity, then proceeding through medieval and early modern drama’s stage representations of transgender/transvestism, followed by a discussion of the eighteenth-century writings of Casanova and the Marquis de Sade, the nineteenth-century work of Dubarry, Panizza, and a number of American Romantic poets, and concluding his survey by returning to the general characterization of texts from the twentieth century’s latter half as concerned with both transsexuality and cross-dressing, though each for different reasons, as later chapters explain in detail.

2.8. Conclusion

This project has expended many pages thus far on describing the difficulties of transgender identity, both within individuals’ lived experiences of it and in film’s limited ability to effectively depict the vast diversity that exists within the category in only a few dozen hours of footage. In addition to the ideological and psychological complexities of offering representations of transgender that reflect current lived reality, it is important that we not neglect to consider the practical dimensions of film representation. In general, filmmakers make movies that they want people to *watch*; the more directly commercial the initial vision of a film project is, the more the filmmaker must take into account the

feasibility of making a profit and thus depicting content that will in some way appeal to a wide cross-section of viewers.

Transgender identity in our culture has not yet achieved such widespread “appeal,” let alone the lesser standards of understanding and acceptance; I bear this thought in mind when examining the films in Chapters 3 and 4 and the flaws I describe in their portrayals of transgendered characters. Given that we do not yet live in Dvorsky and Hughes’s postgenderist world, gender *does* still matter in our society, at least in the one that exists beyond the four walls of a darkened movie theater. Assuming they are not explicitly marketed as science fiction, films are generally expected to bear some resemblance to the world their audiences live in; the suspension of disbelief can only carry an audience so far. All of that said, however, I do believe that several of the films in Chapters 3 and 4 do contain *elements* of postgenderism or at the very least, more progressive and inclusive versions of gender than those that our society attempts to force upon people in often violent ways. To that end, I shall provide here a list of criteria that make up what I will call a “positive portrayal” of transgender identity. No “perfect” film portrayal of transgender (or any other identity, for that matter) can be said to exist, but films that come closer to the “world without gender” that theorists like Haslanger, Okin, Bornstein, and others envision feature one or more of the following elements:

- Portrayals of gender that publicly (deliberately, and in view of other people) contradict traditional normative stereotypes of both appearance and behavior

- Onscreen conversation about gender identity that highlights characters' perceptions of themselves as simply "not fitting" the male-female binary, either occasionally or permanently
- Communities (families or other stable groups) that demonstrate overt acceptance or celebration of non-binary gender identity
- Avoiding the exploitation of transgender identity for the sole purpose of comedic appeal or farce
- Addressing the effects that transgender identity, and the transition process in particular, have on people *other* than the transgendered individual

Ideally, we might hope for future depictions of transgender identity that resemble contemporary portrayals of gay/lesbian or ethnic minority characters; by and large, these characters' sexual orientations or racial identities are just "something that they happen to be," and not the whole of who they are.

CHAPTER THREE: FOLLOWING A SCRIPT: TRANSSEXUALITY AND BINARY GENDER

3.1. Introduction: Don't You Find It Odd That Plastic Surgery Can Cure A Mental Disorder?

“The correct target for any successful transsexual rebellion would be the gender system itself. But transsexuals won't attack that system until they themselves are free of the need to participate in it” (Bornstein 83). The category of transsexuality, as defined by the films discussed in this chapter, includes people who undergo surgical and/or hormonal treatment that alters their material bodies in order to comply with the societal narrative or “script” that is assigned to their desired gender identity. Perhaps more than any other form of transgender or non-binary gender identity, transsexuality highlights both the inadequacy of the binary gender framework to accurately represent the totality of real people *and* the absolute centrality that must be given to that framework in order for transsexuals to achieve the outcome that they so fervently desire.

In the early years of SRS in the U.S.⁷¹, gender identity clinics required candidates to prove to doctors the authenticity of their alleged transsexuality; in other words, these individuals had to justify to an (all-male, at the time) assembled team of physicians that their desire for surgery reflected a “real” internal sense of gender that contradicted their anatomy. Transsexual theorist Sandy Stone points out the highly problematic aspects of

⁷¹ I refer here generally to the 1950s and 60s, though the earliest cases of SRS *reported on* in the U.S. in the 1950s actually took place in other countries. The major thrust of debate over and increasing performance of surgeries took place primarily in the 1960s.

this process; namely, the clinics' enduring failure to devise such a "test" for eligibility that was both objective and repeatable, and the assumption underlying the decision itself that there was some objective "ideal standard of gender" to which an individual's performance of that gender could be compared:

[E]ven after considerable research, no simple and unambiguous test for gender dysphoria syndrome could be developed...[At the Stanford clinic, one of the early major performers of surgical gender reassignment], the final decisions of eligibility for gender reassignment were made by the staff on the basis of an individual *sense* of the "appropriateness of the individual to their gender of choice. The clinic took on the additional role of "grooming clinic" or "charm school" because, according to the judgment of the staff, the men who presented as wanting to be women did not always "behave like" women. Stanford recognized that gender roles could be learned (to an extent). Their involvement with the grooming clinics was an effort to produce not simply anatomically legible females, but *women*...i.e., *gendered* females...[C]andidates for surgery were evaluated on the basis of their *performance* in the gender of choice. The criteria constituted a fully acculturated, consensual definition of gender, and *at the site of their enactment we can locate an actual instance of the apparatus of production of gender.* (227-28, emphasis in original)

To be deemed eligible for surgical intervention, in other words, alleged transsexuals had to think of and present themselves to the medical profession as "diseased," "ill," or "defective" specimens of humanity.

Even the attempt to gain that eligibility by appearing at the clinic in the first place was, and continues to be, little more than a far-off dream for many transsexuals, who are prevented from even trying by the very real-world constraints of finance, culture, and class. As Bornstein laments,

Transsexuals, especially middle-class pre-operative transsexuals, are heavily invested in maintaining their status as "diseased" people. The demedicalization of transsexuality would further limit surgery in this

culture, as it would remove the label of “illness” and so prevent insurance companies from footing the bill. (119)

This tension between seeing oneself on the one hand as an unusual but still acceptable deviation on a spectrum of internal gender identity and on the other as being compelled to embrace and internalize the discourse of illness to achieve self-actualization (as much literature on transsexual reassignment surgery has argued that the surgery allows such people to do) creates an apparently impossible situation, placing the transsexual seeking surgery as, in Judith Butler’s words, “begin[ning] to become that for which there is no place in the given regime of truth” (184).

We might hope that such a dilemma would eventually be recognized and somehow overcome by those within the medical profession, somehow altering the discourse they used to talk about transsexuality and/or the basis on which it was treated. However, as Anne Fausto-Sterling argued over 40 years after the first human sex reassignment surgeries,

Winning the right to surgical and legal sex changes, however, [has] exacted a price: the reinforcement of a two-gender system. By requesting surgery to make their bodies match their gender, transsexuals enact the logical extreme of the medical profession’s philosophy that within an individual’s body, sex and gender must conform. (107)

Fausto-Sterling does acknowledge the recent “large cracks” that have appeared in the “edifice of transsexual dualism,” citing what she calls the “concept of transgenderism,” to which she attributes a

more radical re-visioning of sex and gender...[T]ransgenderists accept “kinship among those with gender-variant identities. Transgenderism supplants the dichotomy of transsexual and transvestite with a concept of

continuity"... Today, many [transsexuals] argue that they need to come out as transsexuals, permanently assuming a transsexual identity that is neither male nor female in the traditional sense. (107)

Such a belief would indeed seem to overcome the absolute need for a two-gender system; however, even those individuals that we might assume to be part of such a movement have themselves commented on their own internal sense that their bodies must conform to someone else's expectations.

Kate Bornstein is often cited as a pioneer of a queerer version of gender, but she herself admits succumbing to tremendous pressure to change her body from a source outside herself: "I had my genital surgery partially as a result of cultural pressure: I couldn't be a 'real woman' as long as I had a penis (119)...The current gender system relies heavily on everyone's agreement that it's inflexible" (121). In a society that placed less emphasis on the connection between genitals and gender, transsexuals would not need to alter their bodies at all, free as they would be to adopt any gender label they chose. However, such a world does not yet exist, and for those individuals who genitals don't match their internal sense of gender, the two film protagonists discussed in this chapter as cases in point, surgery continues to seem like the only viable option.

3.2. The 'New' New Queer Cinema: Openness and Acceptance, Playing with the Notions of Male and Female

In Chapter 2, I discussed the history of New Queer Cinema, a movement largely contained within the early 1990s in American cinema. In fact, just a few short years after coining the term, B. Ruby Rich herself declared NQC to be over almost as soon as it

began, shifting her characterization of the collection of films from a movement to a “moment” (18). In an article for the *Village Voice*, she declared that “the fierce political and aesthetic energy of the early-‘90s cinematic breakthroughs is hardly omnipresent today” (2002). Rich attributes this lack of enduring impact to NQC’s existence well outside the mainstream, suggesting that the only queer content that does appear there features the opposite themes of hatred-based violence or the “gay best friend” and closing her article with this challenge: “Now that the U.S. has rushed headlong into war, nursing a toxic cocktail of masculinity and patriotism, we need queer visions of sexuality, gender, desire, and community more than ever.”⁷²

JoAnne C. Juett argues that mainstream media have undeniably responded to this call, though not necessarily in a highly prolific manner, due in large part to cultural forms *other* than film:

[O]ther media platforms are actually taking much larger strides than cinema to bring queer-themed texts into the mainstream in interesting and intriguing ways. *Ugly Betty* features a transsexual; *The L Word* is available on iTunes; OurChart.com offers *Girltrash*, across cable networks gay-themed material continues to be replayed or emerges anew⁷³, and the DVD industry continues to expand exponentially – all featuring queer-themed material without the hype or the protests of the past. (61)

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ For other cable shows featuring queer characters, see HBO’s *Rome*, *Six Feet Under*, *The Sopranos*, *True Blood*, and *The Wire* and Showtime’s *Nurse Jackie*, *Queer As Folk*, and *Shameless*. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) has also compiled an annual report since 1995 listing all of the LGBT characters on broadcast (non-cable) television, who have appeared in such programs as Fox’s *American Dad*, *Family Guy*, *Glee*, *House*, and *The Simpsons*, ABC’s *Desperate Housewives*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, and *Modern Family*, CBS’s *The Good Wife*, and NBC’s *The Playboy Club* and *Will and Grace* <<http://www.glaad.org/publications/whereweareontv11>>.

NQC's "new queer audience," Juett suggests, is no longer confined to gay and lesbian film festivals, once the only venue for queer-themed films; filmmakers now have a much wider variety of options for places to perform their work. NQC's first iteration also came and went before academic queer and transgender theories had time to gain the prominence they hold today, thus many of the earlier films were a direct response to the more dichotomous field of gay and lesbian studies and its reliance on binary oppositions (heterosexual/homosexual, male/female, masculine/feminine).

Juett credits Bornstein's creation in *Gender Outlaw* of the "third space" that allows for increased fluidity in gender expression, but asserts that "the next wave" of New Queer Cinema took another full decade to appear,

this time undergirded by a theory that matched its intention to blur the dichotomous boundaries of gender and sex, to play with the notions of male and female, and to challenge the very nature of identity which, according to Sarah Gamble "is no longer necessarily codeterminate on gender"⁷⁴ ... I would argue that the new wave of New Queer Cinema is less an activist or defiant movement [as Aaron described NQC's first manifestation], and much more a movement about openness and acceptance ... that potentially can penetrate mainstream film with significant effect ... without the paranoid repression of past efforts, particularly through stereotyped characters. (63)

Dennis Harvey of the San Francisco Bay Guardian attributes this shift from what he dubs "New Queer Cinema Edition 1" to its newer (and queerer) successor to the general public's new interest in, and not just "tolerance for," gay culture and characters: "The most obvious popular U.S. examples are all on TV at present: *Will and Grace*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Queer as Folk*, and other ratings champs" (2004).

⁷⁴ Sarah Gamble, "Gender and Transgender Criticism," in Julian Wolfrey, ed., *Introducing Criticism at the 21st Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002) 50.

Both of the films discussed in this chapter fall within the post-2000 time period ascribed by Juett, Harvey, and others to “New Queer Cinema Edition 2,” and as I shall show in the rest of the chapter, both contain characteristic elements of the original NQC, the new NQC, and/or the positive portrayal of transgender outlined in Chapter 2. I will discuss the films not in chronological order, but in order of increasing levels of the “defiance” I mentioned in Chapter 1, beginning with a film that adheres almost completely to binary gender norms and ending with one that strongly questions them. Despite the aspects of the film that I find somewhat disappointing in their tendency toward parody and stereotype, I will begin my discussion of transgender-themed films with Duncan Tucker’s *Transamerica* (2005), one of the first mainstream wide-release films to expose general American audiences to both the concept and the reality of transgender identity and demonstrate that neither concept nor reality is as simple as it may seem.

3.3. *Transamerica* (2005): “My Body May Be a Work in Progress, But There is Nothing Wrong with My Soul”

3.3-a. Run over at the intersection of crossing and passing

Peter Caster and Allison Andrew aptly characterize the most central ideological conflict experienced by both *Transamerica*’s audience and its transsexual protagonist: “[T]he film itself occupies the tense position of the transgendered person at the intersection of crossing and passing. It angers fundamentalists unwilling to acknowledge the shifting of borders it makes visible; it may dismay radical critics for its mainstream

qualities” (138). As I have already alluded to, the strongest criticism generally levied against screenwriter/director Duncan Tucker’s road movie is the tendency of its in one sense very “queer” main character to uncritically embrace so many of the conservative values of the heteronormative system that attempts to oppress her.

From the audience’s first view of Bree Osbourne in the pink palace that is her one-bedroom apartment to her readily apparent outcast status in the one place where she *should* be able to feel “at home,” a room full of post-operative transsexuals, the film repeatedly depicts Bree as the very epitome of the mainstream, proper, conservative “woman.” Viscerally repulsed by the squalor of Toby’s New York flophouse apartment and the experience of “camping, on the *ground*, with *bugs*,” Bree tries to avoid all objects and environments not explicitly associated with high femininity, and her concern with maintaining her visual (feminine) appearance borders on obsession. The reaction to this portrayal of the “radical critics” that Caster and Andrew refer to, perhaps activists like Bornstein and Wilchins, might be easy to imagine: with the emphasis in both authors’ writing on dismantling the binary gender system entirely, or at least questioning its most basic assumptions, we might anticipate their harsh criticism of Tucker’s film and its failure to seize the opportunity to queer mainstream culture every time that opportunity arises.

However, Tucker himself cites these very names as sources with whom he consulted concerning the accuracy of *Transamerica*’s depiction of transsexuality:

After I finished the script, I asked a few trans women like Kate Bornstein and Riki Wilchins ... to read it for me and vet it for accuracy. I also asked

Calpernia Addams and Andrea James.⁷⁵ I'm glad to say that all of them found just, you know," ... there's a wealth of transsexual experience." ... I'm happy that the transwomen who read it for me found little for me to change. What they did find to change, I changed. (Roberts 34)

I would argue that these overall complimentary responses to the film reflect real transgendered people's awareness of the first component of Cheshire Calhoun's theory of displacement, which I discussed in Chapter 2: "(1) [I]n heterosexual [and two-gendered] society all citizens are required to adopt a real or pseudonymous heterosexual [and binary gender] identity as a condition of access to the public sphere" (Calhoun 82). In order to become "speaking subjects" within the public spheres of society, individuals are *required* (not suggested, or pressured, but *required*) to adopt an intelligible gender that can be "read" by other people; lacking such a legible identity, they are all but "erased" in a cultural sense, their very presence in the public sphere largely ignored.

Legal scholar Kenji Yoshino makes a similar claim using the language of assimilation, which is strongly implicated in and associated with the rhetoric of passing:

Surrendering our individuality is what permits us to enter communities larger than the narrow stations of our individual lives. Especially when the traits that divide us are ... morally arbitrary, this surrender seems like something to be prized. Indeed, assimilation is not only often beneficial, but sometimes necessary. (771)

Tucker echoes this sentiment, describing the movie as "a movie about life and acceptance and the way that we're all alike, rather than a movie about someone who's different"

(Roberts 34). All of these passages, as well as the film itself, demonstrate the unavoidable

⁷⁵ Addams and James are well-known transsexual activists who also perform cameo roles in *Transamerica* and appear in the documentary *Middle Sexes: Redefining He and She*, which I mentioned in Chapter 1. The murder of Addams' cisgendered male lover Barry Winchell in 1999 formed the basis for the HBO feature film *Soldier's Girl* (2003), which could also be included in this project; I do not discuss it at length, however, for reasons of brevity.

importance for transitioning transsexuals of constructing and performing gender in a way that other people can recognize and thus categorize.

In the previous chapter, I outlined a list of criteria that I perceive as being necessary for a positive portrayal of transgender. To explicate my definition of the term “positive,” I argue that first, such a portrayal would reflect the diverse nature of real transgender identity, rather than implying that transgender people only “come in one form.” Secondly, a positive portrayal would depict and/or espouse more radical forms of gender than the male/female binary and move closer to the postgenderist ideal that I described in Chapter 1. Applying these criteria to *Transamerica*, I suggest that while Tucker’s film does depict experiences that real-life transgender people have, one scene even *featuring* a number of such individuals, and it does to a certain extent question the absolutism of binary gender (and to a lesser extent, sexuality), overall the film does not fully possess *any* of the six characteristics I attribute to a positive portrayal.

3.3-b. Queerer than it seems at first? Equating gender and race

I am indebted to Juett, Caster and Andrew, and Rebecca Scherr for performing readings of *Transamerica* that are significantly more cognizant of the film’s queerness than my own original view was; I initially perceived it as a cliché narrative form featuring a cartoonish transsexual hued entirely in pink whose entire life’s ambition is to be granted acceptance by what she deems the most sacred of cultural institutions: the binary gender system. I continue to share Scherr’s belief that *Transamerica* and Todd Haynes’s 2002 film *Far From Heaven* similarly privilege heteronormativity and

generally refuse to be queerer than they are by actively challenging mainstream conservative values:

These characters are ... engaged in *personal* quests. They are not interested in exploring the politics of their otherness, they do not question the foundation of the dominant society that designates their otherness, and they are not interested in occupying the margins of intelligibility. (1, emphasis in original)

Ryan seems to share this view, as evidenced by the passage from her dissertation quoted in Chapter 1, which argues that “the *majority* of images of trans people repeatedly downplays the social, cultural, and political implications of trans people’s lives, and focuses instead on micro-level experiences and salacious personal details” (Ryan 18). In framing the central narrative arc as *one individual*’s quest to achieve a goal she has set *only for herself*, the film does not take up any larger criticism of heteronormative culture itself. It also fastidiously avoids my criterion of “portrayals of gender that publicly (deliberately, and in view of other people) contradict traditional normative stereotypes of both appearance and behavior” (Pawlak 91). Indeed, Bree’s entire public persona is obsessively focused on *not* defying binary gender norms; her most stress-inducing experiences are the moments where she is *unexpectedly* read as something other than a “real woman,” the scenes where Toby outs her as a transsexual at Sammy’s Wigwam and the young black girl asks if Bree is “a girl or a boy” at the diner just two such moments.

However, the film does contain several explicit instances of queerness and Othering that I had *not* noticed until reading Caster and Andrew and Scherr’s arguments, as well as interviews with Tucker himself: all three sources point to the persistent comparison of gender identity and racial identity, suggesting that Tucker (or at least, his

film) equates the experience of transsexuality with the experience of a non-white racial identity. As Scherr asserts,

[R]acial difference both parallels and intersects in the presentation of "transsexuality" ... *Transamerica* ... demonstrates that the link between "racial others" and "sexual others" is so deeply ingrained within U.S. culture that the presentation of "otherness" cannot be visually conceived of without recourse to the rhetoric of racial difference ... Her otherness within the larger cultural framework is rendered *visible* through the film's analogical link between Bree's identity and non-white people. In other words, to make the analogy clear to viewers, Bree must stand out in relation to other "others." Simply presenting her as passing in the white world would fail to delineate Bree's identity as subjugated, a political identity that requires racial difference rhetoric as well as a hint of Civil rights and post-colonial rhetoric in order to send the "correct" message to the audience ... The constant positioning of Bree up against this backdrop of racial difference operates analogically: the message is that to be transsexual and white is *like* being racially other. (3, emphasis in original)

Tucker himself also makes comments in interviews that associate transgender and non-whiteness in what seem to be strange ways when discussing the research he conducted in preparing to write the script: "I went out and met ... transgender women ... we'd usually arrange to meet in a restaurant. I'd get there and look around, asking myself, 'OK, who's the transsexual?' You don't say 'tranny' for the same reason you don't say 'nigger'" (Newton 2005). This association *does* make sense, according to Scherr, if we recognize the discursive similarities between transsexuality and blackness: "[U]nconsciously Tucker is linking blackness and transsexuality along the axes of non-normativity and visibility" (3).

The suturing of gender Otherness and race Otherness is most apparent in two aspects of the film's diegesis: the opening scene where the audience watches Bree perform her daily feminization ritual, and virtually all of her interactions with people of

color. I will describe each of these examples in detail and then discuss how reception theory helps explain why these moments may go entirely unnoticed by a certain type of (white) viewer, one who might consequently read the film as hardly queer at all.

Viewed through a feminist lens, the movie's opening sequence reads as almost nauseatingly heteronormative: the first shot is a clip from a voice training video featuring Andrea James (whose real-life friend and business partner Calpernia Addams appears later in the film in the Dallas scene); James and Addams co-own the company Deep Stealth, which produces this and other training videos to help transgendered people achieve effective passing. The phrase "this is the voice I want to use" that James repeats with different inflections demonstrates the highly performative and scripted nature of gender, suggesting that if a transgendered woman like Bree can only perform the role's physical and behavioral components adequately, she can successfully pass as a woman, with no consideration of her internal sense of herself or whether she finds the performance of this kind of femininity to be authentic to that internal "voice."

The scene continues by pulling back from the James video and showing Bree applying the visual markers of femininity to her body: artificial breast inserts in her bra, a girdle to disguise her male genitalia, and ultra-feminine clothing, makeup, and nail polish, all in distressingly stereotypical shades of pink. The remaining space of Bree's small apartment contains still more feminine touches: pale pink paint on the walls, over-the-top floral patterns on the sofa, bedspread, and curtains, and a conspicuously-placed copy of *Glamour* magazine on the coffee table.

The audience learns in short order the motivation for this excess of pink-and-white femininity: the scene is interspersed with voiceover dialogue from Bree's appointment with her psychiatrist, for which she has been preparing. The doctor compliments Bree on the "authenticity" of her womanly presentation, which ostensibly leads him to sign the consent form for SRS, reducing her to what Juett terms a "system of signs – the signatures of the psychiatrist and the therapist. Their discourse holds deconstructive and reconstructive power to which Bree has no choice but to submit" (76). This scene and others that show Bree performing exaggerated femininity seem likely to make every viewer's inner gender rebel cringe; the extensive list of medical procedures she has already undergone just to achieve *passable*, not even "authentic," womanhood certainly begs the question of "why it has to be this way," why womanhood in this culture seems to come with such a long (and often physically painful) list of requirements.

To turn this rigid "thou must conform" reading on its head, Scherr highlights the presence of all of the objects in the scene that are *not* pink: after turning off the James video, Bree puts a record on the turntable, and the audience listens along with her to African diva Miriam Makeba singing a traditional Zulu battle song. As she packs her pink handbag, Bree makes sure to include a copy of Jacques Maquet's *Civilizations of Black Africa*, and the brief shots of her apartment walls feature artifacts from various "other" cultures, an African mask, a foreign-language poster, and a framed photograph of African women wearing rows of neck rings. Scherr argues that the juxtaposition of these clearly "Other" sounds and objects with Bree's dressing ritual "signify in such a way as

to present Bree herself as a warrior going into battle ... She is putting on her armor, readying herself to fight and win, and, like 'Black Africa,' she is fighting the battle of the subjugated, the colonized" (3). Read in this way, the scene shifts from being a parodic glimpse of feminine performance to a tableau replete with images of queerness, or "not-quite-familiarity": Bree is doing battle with femininity in an attempt to *conquer* the traditional gender system that has her in its grip; ironically, this triumph seems to adopt an "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" strategy.

Throughout the film, Bree's interactions with non-white characters provide a multi-hued, multicultural context against which the viewer can read Bree's own status as an outsider; non-white characters virtually *always* demonstrate acceptance of or indifference to Bree's transsexuality. Her neighborhood and work environment are composed entirely of working-class Hispanic people; her closest friend and therapist Margaret is a Latina woman; the mother of the African-American girl who "reads" Bree's difference in the Arkansas diner scolds her daughter for improper behavior but does not react to Bree in any visible way; the only character who seems able to view her as a potential sexual/romantic interest is a Native-American man. As Scherr argues of the diner scene in particular,

[S]uch an encounter reinforces the notion that Bree, who usually passes so successfully among whites, can be "seen" by a person whose visible blackness categorizes her as "other" within the dominant culture. Here the director plays with the concepts of visibility and stealth, blackness and transness, in an effort, it seems, to drive home to viewers that he thinks that the "otherness" attributed to transgender people establishes a kind of connective bond that bridges differences across and within heterogeneous, marginalized populations. (4)

Thus, people of color are able to “see” Bree in a way that white people are not; they consciously or unconsciously recognize her outsider status and form a connection to her on that basis.

Caster and Andrew and Scherr’s readings of these scenes depend upon the viewer’s recognition of their queerness, derived as it is from the discourse of racial otherness. However, such readings fail to consider the impact of reception theory on this assumption; I suggest that many viewers would not recognize these racial cues at all. In Chapter 2 I cited Alexander Doty’s approach to queering popular culture, which suggests that “texts acquire meaning or are marked as queer not necessarily through their inherent content, but through the interpretive work that is done *on* them, by either the texts’ authors or their audiences” (Pawlak 71). The central agent of queering, then, is the viewer him/herself, and not the text; it is this fact, I believe, that troubles readings of *Transamerica* that associate transgender identity with non-white racial identity.

To experience the film in this way, viewers would have to recognize the cues described above *as inherently raced*; as I said before of assumptions applied across a mass audience, this simply seems unlikely to be the case. The theory of intersectionality⁷⁶ suggests that identity categories do not exist in isolation from each other, but form a complex web of “interaction between a range of discourses, institutions, identities, and forms of exploitation, that structure subjectivities (and the relations between them) in elaborate, heterogenous, and often contradictory ways” (Sullivan 72). Numerous queer

⁷⁶ This term was originally coined in this context by Kimberle Crenshaw; see Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991): 1241-1299.

theorists⁷⁷ have already highlighted the tendency of gay and lesbian theorists and activists and even other queer theorists to overlook race in their sole focus on sexuality, leading them to “white-wash” the figure of the homosexual, as Ian Barnard writes:

Any Western politics, no matter how coalitional its compass, that defines itself in terms of ... sexual orientation only ... will be a white centered and white dominated politics, since, in the West, only white people can afford to see their race as unmarked, as an irrelevant or subordinate category of analysis. (202)

I would suggest that Tucker performs a similar kind of overlooking, though of a different kind of truth: rather than overlooking race, his spoken assumption that transgender identity is similar to non-white racial identity overlooks the fact that gender and race are very differently marked in cultural discourse, *especially by white viewers*, who are statistically more likely to be in the audience of a mainstream film.⁷⁸ I will not attempt to argue that this country has achieved a “color-blind” society; racism and racial discrimination continue to exist in many forms. However, I would argue that in general, race is viewed as *much* less central to the “category of what constitutes a legible person” (Scherr 4) than gender, particularly by white people, who by virtue of their own racial identity and its inherent privilege, do not see people with other racial identities as significantly “unintelligible.” Mainstream culture openly acknowledges the highly constructed nature of race and its lack of basis in stable biological fact; as Henry Louis Gates asserts, “Race, as a meaningful criterion within the biological sciences, has long

⁷⁷ See Barnard (1999), Anzaldúa (1987, 1991), Cohen (1997), Goldman (1996), Moraga (1983, 1996), Ng (1997), and Ki Namaste (1996).

⁷⁸ Numerous studies of culture in America have demonstrated that white people are generally assumed to constitute the primary (and often target) audience for mainstream films, particularly when those films do not overtly feature non-white central characters or themes.

been recognized as a fiction. When we speak of the ‘white race’ or the ‘black race’ or the ‘Aryan race,’ we speak in biological misnomers and, more generally, in metaphors” (qtd. in Miles 1997: 134).

To illustrate this idea with an example, let us imagine the scene in the Arkansas diner in reverse: imagine the child encountering an ambiguously raced adult. Can we imagine her asking the question, “Are you white or black?” and further, imagine any adult (regardless of gender) in contemporary America experiencing the same degree of emotion that Bree does? The answer, I would argue, is no. While the dominant (white) culture in this country is still able to *see* race in a visual sense, race does not function in the same ultimately ostracizing way that gender does. Being ambiguously raced does not carry nearly the stigma that accompanies being ambiguously gendered; this becomes evident in the recent proliferation of options in the “Race/Ethnicity” section on various kinds of identification forms. Many such forms include explicitly non-binary options like “Bi-racial” or “Multi-racial”; no such diverse alternatives yet exist for gender categories.⁷⁹

In order for viewers to “get” Tucker’s subliminal message that race and gender Othering function similarly, they would have to have what Caster and Andrew term “their own gender politics” that mirrored this belief, which the above example demonstrates to be largely not the case (137). Viewers of any racial identity might *see* the African artifacts in Bree’s apartment, her Hispanic neighbors and coworkers, and the young girl

⁷⁹ Some identification forms have begun offering “Other” as one gender option, but this practice is first, exceedingly rare in practice; second, duplicates the problem of the “third” that I discussed in Chapter 2; and third, comes nowhere near allowing the plurality that is widely accepted in racial identity.

in the diner, but they may not attribute the Other status to them that Tucker does. These cues might be read instead as a series of *individual people* who treat Bree with at worst, casual indifference and at best, respect and kindness. Bree's interactions with people of color generally occur in dyadic form as one-on-one encounters, perhaps sending the message that things like race *and* gender don't matter absent the hegemonizing tendency of communities, that the path to increased tolerance and acceptance of people marked as "different" lies in seeing them, and their differences, as individual phenomena rather than case examples of a larger group about which we have already formed our own conclusions.

3.3-c. Communities of (only) two: lack of acceptance

The distinction between individual and community responses to transgender raises the next of my criteria for positive portrayal, "communities (families or other stable groups) that demonstrate overt acceptance or celebration of non-binary gender identity." In my reading of the film, *Transamerica* contains no such community: Bree is an outcast within her family of origin as well as the only transgender "community" shown in the film, the party at May Ellen's Dallas home. From the beginning of the film, the audience sees Bree as a loner: in the opening scenes, she deliberately avoids eye contact with her neighbors and restaurant coworkers, who also seem not to take any particular notice of her; when the psychiatrist asks if she has "supportive friends," she mentions only "being very close with her therapist" and (untruthfully) tells him that her family is dead; when

she runs out of options (and money) and must go to her parents' Phoenix home to ask them for help, her own mother slams the door in her face.

Rejection by family members is certainly a common experience for transgendered people; many discuss post-transition experiences of having to find “new” families and communities who give them the acceptance and respect that their own families deny them.⁸⁰ The nature of Bree’s family’s rejection in particular demonstrates the third element of transgender displacement that I outlined in Chapter 2: “[3] heterosexual and two-gendered society tends to deny the existence of non-binary gender identities by explaining these identities’ visual or behavioral signs away as “deviations within the norm” or simply failing to acknowledge them at all, thus reinforcing the binary gender construct” (Pawlak 62). Despite Bree’s insistence that her parents (and later her sister) call her by her chosen female name, her mother stubbornly continues to call her Stanley and is overjoyed when she forcefully grabs Bree’s crotch and finds male genitals, exclaiming, “Thank god Murray, he’s still a boy!”

As Caster and Andrew point out, Elizabeth denies all indications of Bree’s womanness, focusing entirely on the association between genitals and gender:

In response to this invasion not only of her personal space but her physical body, Bree grabs her mother's hand and forces it to feel her developed breast. The dismayed mother cries, "My poor Stanley, I can't look at you!" and turns away. The mother's crude actions adhere to rigid sex/gender binaries wherein male

⁸⁰ See Kate Bornstein and S. Bear Bergman, eds., *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2010); Joan Nestle, Riki Wilchins, Claire Howell, eds., *GenderQueer: Voices from Beyond the Sexual Binary* (New York: Alyson Books, 2002); Tracie O’Keefe and Katrina Fox, eds., *Finding the Real Me: True Tales of Sex and Gender Diversity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

anatomy equals maleness, an underdetermined equation the film and queer theory treat as a false dichotomy. (138)

Her mother's reaction to the presence of Bree's hormonally-induced breast tissue can also be read as an example of what Julia Kristeva terms the abject⁸¹: "the human reaction (horror, vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other" (Felluga 2011); Elizabeth expects to find a masculine chest but encounters a feminized one instead, thus dismantling in her mind the connection between subject (Stanley; male) and object (Bree; female), as well as *troubling* the connection between herself (mother; female) and Bree (son; *now* female).

The relationship gradually forged between Bree and her newly-discovered son Toby might be perceived as a sort of "community," particularly when viewed within the larger context of the "queered road movie" that Robert Lang describes as "a natural [union], with all the possibilities [it] provides characters who choose to live and love outside the institution of the monogamous heterosexual partnership and the conventional nuclear family" (332). However, as Bree herself points out when Toby gives her the silent treatment after (unbeknownst to her) he discovers the truth of her gender identity, "You know, social ostracism doesn't work in a community of two." The concept of community relies for its intelligibility largely on numbers; social justice movements throughout the last century, for example (the black "community"; the gay "community"; later, the queer "community") have depended upon the general public's recognition of

⁸¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Roudiez, trans., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

their causes as being shared by a significant number of people, which ironically allowed that same public to ostracize those communities as they thus became identifiable. In the community of two to which Bree and Toby belong, ostracism has no effect, because there is no third (or additional) party *with whom* he can ostracize her.

The most visually apparent example of Bree's lack of membership in any significant form of community occurs when she and Toby arrive at Mary Ellen's Dallas home and unexpectedly stumble across the very queerest of all of the film's spaces: the first official meeting of the "gender pride Caribbean cruise planning committee." Having learned from Margaret that Mary Ellen is a stealth transsexual (meaning her transsexuality is closeted in her everyday life), Bree is shocked and terrified as she and Toby witness post-op transsexual woman examining photos of new vaginas, comparing vaginal dilators, and discussing previous lives as straight men that ended with two of them holding hands in the recovery room after simultaneous genital reconstruction surgeries. The lone FTM transsexual in the room – a rarity approximately matching actual statistics – whispers conspiratorially to Toby after successfully passing with him that "we walk among you."

It is not these people's transsexuality that shocks Bree; she is transsexual herself, which suggests that here, more than anywhere else she goes in the film (or in her life), Bree should not feel like an outsider. However, it is their forthright openness about being transsexual that so greatly unsettles her, as central as stealth and unobtrusive passing have been to her transition process thus far; after almost three days in a car with Toby, Bree

has managed to hide both her transsexuality and the pair's familial bond from him. Another core part of Bree's conservative value system is her aversion to corporeal experiences in general; her own penis "disgusts her" to the point where she "doesn't even like looking at it." During their first night in a shared hotel room, she displays extreme discomfort at the sight of Toby's near-nakedness that I would argue stems only partially from her knowledge that he is her biological son, and the references she makes to her own bodily functions always employ some form of euphemism ("Number One" to describe the diuretic effects of her hormone pills; "ladies' room" or "powder room" to cite her need to urinate).

The blunt honesty of Mary Ellen's friends rattles Bree's conservatism; she is unable to unemotionally discuss her own genitals with a medical professional, let alone imagine showing photos of them to casual friends. Caster and Andrew claim that much of the positioning of Bree as other in this scene occurs visually and can be inferred from her positioning relative to other characters:

Most often the editing of this scene juxtaposes one-shots of Bree, where she is the only character in the frame, with two- and three-shots, as several people crowd the mise-en-scene with jovial intimacy in contrast with her isolation. The alternating shots emphasize Bree mostly alone and seeing everyone else, inviting the audience to acknowledge her feelings of exclusion, a device of editing that highlights her social ostracism. Her sole effort at fitting in fails when she critiques to her host one transgender woman's failure to pass, and the host replies that the woman is in fact a born woman, a Mary Kaye representative. The joke is at Bree's expense, and in this rarest of spaces where she has the opportunity for easy acceptance and should feel at home, she experiences loneliness and difference, playing the uncomfortable straight man in this queerest of spaces. (137)

Bree even apologizes to Toby in the following scene on behalf of “those ersatz women,” deliberately distancing herself from the people who are in many ways *just like her*. When Toby asks what ersatz means, Bree almost mechanically spouts the language of transphobia, referring to the transsexuals in the other room as “phony . . . trying to be something [they’re] not,” an accusation she is very obviously afraid of having hurled at her.

In another of the film’s queer moments, Toby refutes her negative characterization, saying that “he thought they were nice,” unfazed as he seems to be by at least the abstract concept of transsexual identity when made aware of it from the outset. Until this point in the film, Bree has striven unceasingly to fit *into* groups, but here, confronted with the presence of an admittedly small community more likely than almost any other to overlook or even to celebrate her difference, she rejects the figurative olive branch she is offered. In an initial gesture of support, Mary Ellen promises to “pass the word” to the guests about Bree’s stealth status with Toby, commiserating that “[they’ve] all been there,” but even when Toby opens the potential Pandora’s box by asking Bree how she knows Mary Ellen and her friends, Bree deliberately avoids an opportunity for communal inclusion, more frightened of the potential negative reaction of one person than reassured by the presence of many more people displaying such obviously positive ones.

3.3-d. Playing it just for laughs

The last point I would like to make about *Transamerica* is its failure to meet the positive portrayal criteria of “avoiding the exploitation of transgender identity for the sole purpose of comedic appeal or farce.” The exploitation of gender-transgressing behavior for comic appeal is easy to locate in almost all instances where it occurs in film: from “Uncle Milty Berle” dressed in drag more than 50 years ago to the flood of 1980s and ‘90s films featuring cross-dressers and drag queens, the “man in a dress” image has virtually always been featured for its ability to make an audience laugh, based as it is on the audience’s shared assumption that the very idea is itself ridiculous.

The negative impact of this formulation on actual cross-dressers and transgendered people (the biologically male in particular) is easy to predict: if the movies suggest that a man in woman’s clothing is silly or farcical, we will do what Phillips and Baudrillard argue that we do, and allow this representation to stand in for or replace the real, assuming the same degree of farce in a real-life cross-dresser that we are instructed by the diegesis to detect in drag performance on a movie screen. While *Transamerica* does attempt, according to Tucker, to be as “true to life” as possible and reflect the real experiences of transsexuality, there are significant moments where the juxtaposition of Bree’s anatomical maleness and her psychological/social femaleness is played entirely for laughs, ultimately detracting from the film’s overall position as a sympathetic representation of a real phenomenon.

As I discussed before, the amount of pink that appears in virtually every realm of Bree's existence is difficult to un-see; as Scherr suggests,

the shots of Bree applying her pink-tinted make-up, putting on all her pink clothes, slipping into her pink high heels, painting her nails pink, seem a kind of parody of feminine performance resonant not with transsexual self-presentation, but more with drag performance ... She looks like a drag queen up against this background, overdressed, hyper feminine, taller than everyone she passes on the street, although her neighbors don't even bat an eye. (3)

Apparently, though, even Bree has a threshold beyond which there is simply "too much pink": while searching for suitable clothing for the evening at her parents' Phoenix home, her sister Sydney jokingly suggests a faux fur ensemble that she describes as "showgirls on Ice Capades," to which Bree responds, "I'm a transsexual, not a transvestite." While the narrative focus throughout the film prior to this point has been on normalizing Bree's excessive femininity, or at least explaining the need for it, making it seem less strange to the viewer, this scene demonstrates that even Bree herself holds certain biases about what types of visual presentation are appropriate and thus, valid, and which are simply silly. Indeed, one might argue, as her mother does, that the (pink) dress she does end up choosing is just as over-the-top as Sydney's selection had been. However, the wounded expression on Bree's face in response to her mother's jab tells the viewer that this time, the visual *isn't* a performance; *now* it's (arbitrarily) real.

Another common visual motif throughout the film is Bree's selection of footwear and skirts: frequent shots show her tottering through gravel or dirt in 3-inch wedge-heeled sandals, visually akin to a young girl donning her mother's high heels, or trying in vain to sweep her long skirts out of the way so she can relieve herself in various roadside

and wilderness locations. Even the revelation scene where Toby catches sight of Bree's penis for the first time seems aimed at visual comedy: the camera provides a full-length shot of Bree clutching her roll of toilet paper in one hand and her male genitalia in the other, girdle tangled around her knees, and ankles barely vertical atop her impractically high heels. Again, these examples may very well reflect real transsexual women's experiences in adjusting to feminine attire; as Caster and Andrew remind us,

[T]ranssexuals' strong cross-gender identification leads many to strategies of assimilation, meeting stereotypical conventions and thereby reifying ideologically conservative gender norms. Paradoxically, such conformity has led to their perception as 'irrelevant, out of style, invasive, or conservative.'⁸² (134)

This may be exactly what these scenes are intended to depict, but I still insist that an audience's most likely reaction to them, rather than nuanced sympathy and understanding, is snide or derisive laughter.

3.4. *Normal* (2003): "What We Do for Love"

3.4-a. Creating a conversation: city girl meets country boy/(girl)

As I stated in Chapter 1, this project follows the methodology of Jane Gallop's *The Daughter's Seduction*, creating the "possibility of creating exchanges between the discourses of people who do not speak to each other" (xi). While there may seem to be little basis for dialogue between films about a waitress/telemarketer from Los Angeles and a blue-collar family man from rural Illinois, this section will discuss important ways in which *Transamerica* and HBO's 2003 feature film *Normal* are both similar and

⁸² See Susan Stryker, "Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10.2 (2004): 213.

different, with the hope that the comparison produce a “provocative contact which opens to each [film] what is not encompassed by the limits of its identity” (Gallop xii).

Like *Transamerica*, *Normal*'s narrative focuses on a biological man who identifies as transsexual and ultimately wants to undergo sexual reassignment surgery. The film begins at a different temporal point in the narrative, however: when the viewer sees Bree Osbourne for the first time, she is already well into her transition process, having taken hormones and completed all but the final phase of her surgical transformation. Roy/Ruth Applewood, however, first appears to the audience in the most heteronormative form of imagery available: a studio portrait taken with Irma, his wife of 25 years, both conservatively attired in Midwestern neutral tones and smiling blandly into the camera.

Normal's narrative focus also differs importantly from that of *Transamerica*: while Bree's story is driven (pun intended) forward by conventions of the road movie genre, allowing the focus to remain on her experiences as seen from her perspective, *Normal* adopts a slightly wider lens, allowing the viewer to witness not only the transsexual person's experiences and emotions, but also those of *other people*. Bree conducts much of her transition almost entirely alone, her most significant human contact throughout the process occurring with her therapist, while Roy conducts his transition under the watchful eyes of not only his wife, but also his two children, as well as virtually the entire conservative Midwestern Protestant community to which the family has belonged for more than two decades. With these considerations in mind, I shall begin my

analysis of Jane Anderson's play-turned-film by examining the significant differences in setting between *Transamerica* and *Normal* that largely effect both how each narrative moves forward and how the film is received by its viewers, again referring to reception theory.

3.4-b. Location, location, location: setting, the uncanny, and audience reception

Part of *Transamerica*'s ultimate queerness lies in the multiplicitous nature of its cultural backdrop: the majority of the narrative takes place in the American Southwest, framed by, as Scherr argues, "elements that signify 'boutique multiculturalism,'"⁸³ a kind of uncritical selection of objects and images of a variety of 'racial others'" (3). This may be the reason why some viewers may not detect Tucker's apparent desire to cast gender Othering and racial Othering in a similar vein: *most* places where Bree goes feature people of a wide variety of races. There simply is no "mainstream (white) majority" continually surrounding her; ironically, the highest concentration of whiteness in the entire film appears in Mary Ellen's house, though this group is certainly queer for other reasons. The widespread presence of diverse race throughout the film makes Bree's whiteness, in my reading, less apparent than it might otherwise be: *everyone* in this film is a slightly different color from everyone else, and the racial hierarchizing that tends to occur in concentrations of largely white culture is generally absent from the diegesis.

If one became concerned, based on this example, that dominant white culture seemed on the verge of extinction, fear not: white culture is very much alive and well,

⁸³ See Stanley Fish, "Boutique Multiculturalism, or Why Liberals Are Incapable of Thinking about Hate Speech," *Critical Inquiry* 23.2 (1997): 378-395.

and living in rural Illinois. From the sea of white faces at their 25th wedding anniversary party to their Americana-and-innuendo-laden surname, the Applewoods and their community exemplify mainstream white America, and I would suggest that this subliminal but very much present cultural sphere of influence is what makes *Normal* either uncannily disconcerting or comfortingly familiar, depending upon the particular “existing knowledge ... interlocking social identities and life experiences, and ... political/ideological beliefs about the world at large” that a viewer brings to it (Pawlak 70).

The psychoanalytic concept of the uncanny originates in the work of Freud, who in 1919 described the phenomenon as “that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (219). In the midst of a much more complex analysis, Freud suggests that the uncanny in its simplest conception contains the “class of things” which were once familiar, but upon exiting the developmental stage of “animistic mental activity” (239), the individual has repressed that familiarity. The uncanny quality of certain experiences is then derived from the *return* of these repressed memories:

[I]f psycho-analytic theory is correct in maintaining that every affect belonging to an emotional impulse, whatever its kind, is transformed, if it is repressed, into anxiety, then among instances of frightening things there must be one class in which the frightening element can be shown to be something repressed which *recurs* ... this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression. (240)

In this sense, then, any object or experience within *Normal*'s diegesis may be uncanny to the viewer if that viewer experiences it as simultaneously unknown and familiar, a situation likely to create a feeling of cognitive dissonance,⁸⁴ wherein a subject is paradoxically attracted to and repulsed by the same object simultaneously.

Freud explicitly discusses the depiction of the uncanny in literature, which he argues “merits in truth a separate discussion ... The imaginative writer ... can select his world of representation so that it either coincides with the realities we are familiar with or departs from them in what particulars he pleases. We accept his ruling in every case” (248-9). In other words, creators of fictional works have by nature of their authorship the ability to create worlds that mirror our “familiar realities” in widely varying degrees; the closer to such a reality that a narrative world *seems* to be, the more likely it is that such a narrative can produce a sense of the uncanny:

The situation is altered as soon as the writer pretends to move in the world of common reality. In this case he accepts as well all the conditions operating to produce uncanny feelings in real life; and everything that would have an uncanny effect in reality has it in his story. But in this case he can even increase his effect and multiply it far beyond what could happen in reality, by bringing about events which never or very rarely happen in fact. (249)

To briefly summarize the connection between Freud's uncanny and my claim above about a viewer's potential experience of the film, I would argue that depending upon the degree of his/her familiarity with its cultural milieu (white, rural, Midwestern America) and the nature of his/her “own gender politics” (Caster and Andrew 137), a viewer might

⁸⁴ The phrase was coined by Leon Festinger in his 1956 book *When Prophecy Fails* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), which chronicled the followers of a UFO cult as reality clashed with their fervent belief in an impending apocalypse.

perceive a great number of instances of the uncanny because of the film's frequent juxtaposition of the (potentially *very*) familiar with the often dread-or-revulsion-inducing *unfamiliar*.

"Familiar reality," or at least the convincing illusion of it, is offered from the movie's first frame onward: the first sounds are those of winter winds howling across snow-covered farm fields and the strains of Kern and Gershwin's "Long Ago and Far Away," and the visuals feature first men's, and then women's, undergarments hung on an outdoor clothesline with barn and silo prominently visible in the background. The next tracking shot takes viewers through the center of what turns out to be the small town of Earlville, Illinois, a study in classic American clichés: a John Deere-green farming machine trundling through the streets, past old-fashioned storefronts featuring bridal attire and décor, American flags, and well-worn manufacturing facilities.

The scene shifts to a virtual explosion of whiteness, panning across a series of family portraits featuring middle-aged and elderly white couples and one younger couple with their infant son, culminating in a close-up shot of one portrait in particular, the apparent anniversary photo of the film's main characters, Roy and Irma Applewood, which appears above a newspaper announcement of their upcoming anniversary celebration at the local VFW post. The film then offers a third-person perspective shot of the party itself, featuring yet more images of cultural (and racial) whiteness: a vase of white calla lilies, the white posterboard featuring signatures from various well-wishing community members, and the white paper covering the stack of gifts piled on a white-

covered table, followed by a pan shot across the buffet table full of potluck-style fare, including the traditional potato and macaroni salads, hamburgers, and Rice Krispies treats. Lest the monochromatic scheme of the film thus far go unnoticed by the audience, all of the guests at the party are also white, including the film's protagonist family with its blonde-haired wife and daughter. I would suggest that these sequences establish unequivocally the familiarity of this film's world: for any viewer who has spent any amount of time in Midwest culture, everything in this scene is intimately familiar, right down to the patterns on the buffet dishes.

The narrative takes an unexpected turn in fairly short order: the party scene ends with Roy collapsing in a dead faint just as a fellow parishioner in their church finishes his congratulatory remarks on the couple's anniversary, in what film critic Tom Jicha calls "an unfailing tip-off that heartache is only a few frames away" (2003). The following scene attempts to restore normalcy, opening with an exterior landscape shot of the couple's church and continuing inside to the Reverend Dale Muncie's office, where the Applewoods lean forward nervously in their clearly gendered but nonetheless matching neutral-gray sweaters, having solicited the Reverend's advice in solving the problem of "some strain between them." After some initial hesitation, Roy finally breaks down in tears and reveals the "problem" that ultimately becomes the center of the remainder of the film's narrative: "I've been struggling with something for a long time. I prayed for years for it to go away, but it won't. I was born in the wrong body. I'm a woman. I've known it all my life."

Here enters the uncanny: the person with whom Irma has spent the last 25 years of her life has just declared himself to be something other than what she has always believed him to be: a man. That which has been hitherto familiar (the couple's heterosexual marriage; the physical space of the Protestant church, as represented by the wooden crucifix in the shot's background; her husband's male identity) has suddenly been radically called into question. Irma's immediate reaction reflects the likely response of the conservative Midwestern viewer who, like her, has come to feel at home in this so-far-very-familiar environment: all she can do is laugh uncomfortably, even as the tears begin to gather in her own eyes. Irma articulates her own cognitive dissonance later in the film, after Roy assures her that she hasn't "done anything wrong" that caused or contributed to his transsexuality: "Then don't do this ... I know your body. I know your smell. You're a man. That's what you are; don't try to tell me that you're something else." Her physical senses have provided Irma with one set of data for more than two decades, and in her mind, Roy's one-sentence declaration is attempting to deny all of it.

Reverend Muncie's reaction also may stand in for the viewer's; he professes a complete lack of comprehension before proceeding immediately to what seems to *him* to be an obvious question: "What exactly appeals to you about being a woman?" Roy answers with a question of his own that addresses the fundamental divide between proponents of the nature and nurture models of human development: "What appeals to you about being a man?" Potentially like many members of the audience, the Reverend assumes that Roy's gender dysphoria stems from a conscious choice (the same erroneous argument still often made about homosexuality; that it too is a choice), while Roy

counters that belief by pointing out the absurdity of asking why the Reverend's gender identity, which happens to match his birth sex, is appealing to him. Other instances of the uncanny occur throughout the film when the people around Roy observe the physical changes in his body and appearance, the formerly familiar suddenly becoming unfamiliar; examples include the scenes where Roy gives his boss a book about transsexuality in the workplace, Irma gets her first look at Roy's newly-developed breasts, Roy and Irma's son Wayne sees his father for the first time after Roy's transition has begun, and one of Roy's coworkers reacts with hostility when Roy wears a pair of clip-on earrings to work.

The sense of discomfort in the viewer that I have implied thus far is evident in several reviews of the film published shortly after its release; Jicha's piece cited above is even titled "HBO Movie On Gender-bending Anything But Normal," overtly stating the apparent disconnect between familiar reality (normalcy) and Roy's unexpected decision. Jicha maintains an incredulous and even sarcastic tone throughout his review, repeatedly citing the film's "unreality":

[H]e is indifferent to the upheaval his family is going to have to endure ... In an ultimate example of "it's all about me," he expresses a desire to continue living with his wife and children after he becomes a woman. Yet he's portrayed as a victim and those who don't applaud his late-in-life *gender-hopping* are shown to be insensitive bigots. Stellar performances in the lead roles almost compensate for the *off-putting tone* ... Unfortunately for them, they must work against some *ridiculously implausible plot contrivances* ... Roy ... begins to wear earrings and perfume to his blue-collar job. This leads to *predictably nasty confrontations* with co-workers. His request that he be allowed to continue to live under the same roof -- what's more, in the same marital bed -- after his surgery might be *strange, but not as strange as* his wife's acceptance of the bizarre arrangement. (Jicha 2003, italics added)

It seems obvious from these passages that Jicha's personal "gender politics" strongly influence his reading of the film; we might expect a reviewer with more direct knowledge of transgender experience to respond more favorably or at least acknowledge the truth that is present in the film's narrative.

Surprisingly, this seems not to be the case: Erin K. Swenson, herself a post-transition transgendered woman, is also critical of *Normal's* failure to portray a believable "reality":

It seemed clear to me that the writer had no real desire to portray anything other than a minimalist portrait of Ray's gender transition. For instance, there was no reference to Ray's receiving any kind of help whatsoever from anyone for his transition. Few of us would have what it takes to go it alone as Ray did. There was no support group, no therapist, and no supportive physician anywhere in the film ... Clearly the writers had little interest in the transition itself, other than to fill it out enough to play its role in the family story. (Swenson 2003)

Swenson does grant at least some credence to the depiction of the Applewoods' relationship itself, acknowledging its similarity to her own marriage: "I am a professional marriage and family therapist who also transitioned in a 27-year marriage, and I found remarkable similarities between this fictionalized relationship and my own" (2003). However, even with her intimate knowledge of transgender issues, Swenson is critical of the film for much the same reason that Jicha is, that is, because it does not match *her* perception of reality.

To conclude this section, I will explain what it is that has been repressed in Roy's family, friends, and coworkers, Jicha and Swenson, and potentially every viewer who experiences the film as uncanny. Gender transition and the decision to undergo it relies in

large part on the individual's ability (and willingness) to acknowledge the presence within themselves of what Freud termed "constitutional bisexuality,"⁸⁵ Kate Bornstein describes as a "bone to pick with [one's] own gender status, be it gender role, gender assignment, or gender identity" (118), Joyce McDougall calls a universal unconscious desire to "be the other sex while still retaining one's own sexuality" (417), and Phillips describes as "perhaps a displaced fantasy desire to *be* transsexual oneself, to regain that lost state of undifferentiation that we all enjoyed in the mother's womb (see McDougall 413-14)" (161).

All of these authors suggest the existence of an inherent desire in *every* individual to transgress prescribed gender roles, which is eventually repressed with varying degrees of success on the path toward adult psychosexual development. Individuals whose repression remains complete throughout their lives react with fear and/or hostility to visible manifestations in others of the return and embracing of this repressed desire, as evidenced by the examples from the film mentioned above. To make this idea even more concrete by providing an example of its opposite, there is one character in *Normal* who seems to experience virtually *no* negative reaction to Roy's announcement and subsequent transition: the Applewoods' 13-year-old daughter Patty Ann.

⁸⁵ Freud articulated the idea in *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1905) and *An Autobiographical Study* (1935) that all individuals possessed components of both masculine (active) and feminine (passive) tendencies: "Although bisexual tendencies were universal, Freud believed some people were constitutionally endowed with more of one tendency than the other. He believed life experiences, particularly traumatic ones (environmental factors), could have an impact on the development and expression of one's innate instincts (biological factors)" (borngay.procon.org 2009).

As numerous scenes in the film indicate, Patty Ann herself experiences a degree of gender role dissatisfaction: she seems dismayed and/or embarrassed by the arrival of her first menstrual period and continually eschews the visual markers of mainstream femininity, amassing a collection of her father's old clothes that are much too large for her, not wearing a bra, and resisting Irma's every attempt to mold her into a more feminine version of herself. Patty Ann directly references her own social ostracism when Roy cautions her about her fellow students' reactions to his transition, suggesting that they might "start saying really cruel things" to her: "So what? They do anyway." She is fascinated by the practical aspects of Roy's transition into Ruth, asking if her father's "voice is going to change" and if Ruth will "grow [her] hair out," "be just as tall," and "shave [her] legs, under [her] arms, and [her] bikini line"; one of the film's comedic moments occurs when Patty Ann excitedly informs Irma, "Mom, Dad and I have the same breast size now!" and later, she entertains friends at a slumber party with a very graphic visual imitation of her father's upcoming genital surgery involving a banana and a plastic bag.

Overall, Patty Ann's own gender difficulties and her neutral or positive responses to Roy's transition suggest that at least for her, there is nothing uncanny at all about Roy's decision: her repression of her own constitutional bisexuality seems to never have been completed, so she is much more comfortable than almost everyone else in the film with recognizing the same feature in her father. As she responds when Irma reassures her that whatever feelings she might have about Roy's decision are acceptable, even anger, whether at Irma or at Roy, Patty Ann is decidedly "not angry. [She] thinks it's cool." Her

explanation of this perception reveals even more clearly her ambivalence about her own gender; she asks, “Does this let me off the hook? ... Of having to be the girl in the family?” Irma’s response asserting that Patty Ann “*is a girl*” *does* provoke anger, in addition to illustrating Irma’s own narrow notions of what gender actually means, and Patty Ann ironically turns to her father for moral support, complaining, “See? She’s always on my case about it. I can’t do it; I’m just not that type! ... It sucks being a woman,” another indicator of her own potentially cross-gendered subjectivity.

3.4-c. Positive portrayal: publicly defying gender stereotypes

To return once again to *Transamerica*, upon the film’s release a significant component of the transgender community objected to the casting of Felicity Huffman, a biological female, as the transsexual MTF protagonist, arguing that Tucker should have cast a “real” transsexual in the role. In one sense this objection seems logical, and Tucker’s casting decision might be seen as an example of transgender displacement, not allowing transgendered people to “speak in their own voices,” as Feinberg suggests they need the opportunity to do, completely removing them from the public sphere of their own story. Tucker responds directly to this criticism, interestingly arguing that his decision came from a desire to portray transsexuality *more* authentically:

I always get asked, "Why didn't you cast a man," and I'm like, "Because that's not what transwomen look like!" Only, only ... sometimes, when they're at the beginning of their journey or if they're genetically unlucky, they look like a guy in a dress, but, you know, by and large the great number of transwomen I met didn't look like Daniel Day Lewis in a dress. I wanted to honor that, and I might have said it this way in the press notes, that I wanted to honor where Bree was going instead of leaving her anchored in what she had left behind. (Roberts 34)

Tucker's statement reveals yet another way in which his own perception of gender influences the way his film tells its story: like the conservative pioneers of gender transition in the 1960s and Bree herself, Tucker views the transition process as inherently liminal, that is, temporary.

By using the language of movement to describe her transition process ("where Bree was going") and referring to her pre-transition male identity as an "anchor" that would "hold her back" if the character looked too visually masculine, Tucker wants to effect complete separation between Stanley and Bree, as if they are indeed two entirely different (and separate) people. This is exactly the separation that Margaret (Bree's therapist) warns *against*: in her last appointment with Margaret before she leaves for New York, Bree refers to Stanley in the third person when describing her initial phone conversation with Toby, and Margaret quickly scolds her, "No third person ... Stanley's life *is* your life." Margaret explains her subsequent refusal to submit Bree's surgery consent form using the same rationale, saying that she doesn't want Bree to "go through this metamorphosis and find out [she] is still incomplete," not having completed the reconciliation of her pre- and post-transition lives. Bornstein too discusses the peculiar nature of transsexuality as

an illness that can only be cured by silence ... Transsexuals presenting themselves for therapy in this culture are channeled through a system which labels them as having a disease (transsexuality) for which the therapy is to lie, hide, or otherwise remain silent ... Transsexuality is the only condition for which the therapy is to lie. (62)

Tucker practices the same erasure of real transgender subjectivity that his film purports to *stop doing* by offering a "real" look at the experience of being transsexual in

contemporary America. By his own stated admission that he wants the audience to be able to “forget” Bree’s past as a man, Tucker reveals his own ongoing adherence to the binary gender system and belief that it really does/should contain only two options.

In contrast, *Normal* offers a much more “positive” (according to my own criteria) portrayal of transgender identity because it avoids the lies that are central to Tucker’s film. First, *none* of the film’s narrative focus revolves around Roy trying to pass or to hide his transsexual identity from others. Quite to the contrary, in fact: its most poignant moments occur when Roy *reveals* that identity, which he does long before he ever begins attempting to pass. The transition itself occurs in phases, beginning with Roy’s coming out as transsexual (though at first, only to his wife and pastor) and followed by his gradual adoption of visual markers of femininity, a spray of perfume one day, a pair of earrings another, and a wardrobe that becomes more “female” one article of clothing at a time.

The scene where Roy’s coworkers first become aware of something “different” in Roy’s outward presentation does what *Transamerica* in its entirety fails to do: it forces other people, whether they want to or not, to confront the reality of gender-transgressing behavior and make an immediate decision about how to process that transgression. When Roy wears perfume to work, one of his coworkers detects the scent right away but initially tries not to acknowledge it; only the audience is privy to his confused facial expression and brief sniffing of the air as Roy walks away from him. In the next scene, however, feigned ignorance is no longer possible: the same coworker comments in front

of several others that he “keeps smelling this goddamned perfume” and can’t identify its source.

In a continued effort to deny the existence of gender transgression, though, the (all male) group leaps to a different conclusion entirely when Roy claims ownership of the feminine scent: they assume he is having an extramarital affair. Roy denies this several times in quick succession, even stating explicitly that the perfume is “his; [he] put it on this morning” and becomes angry when the men continue to insist upon his marital infidelity, setting off a misogynistic exchange about one man’s desire to “trade his wife in for a younger model” and another asking Roy “what year his new model is.” This “meat and potatoes kind of a crew,” as Roy’s boss Frank describes his coworkers to Irma, would much more readily accept transgression of morality than transgression of traditional gender roles, revealing just how powerful their resistance is to non-normative identity and its expression.

Roy’s decision to wear earrings to work several days later escalates his coworkers’ discomfort: an initial tracking shot of his walk into the building shows various small groups of other (male) employees staring after him dumbfounded, though refraining from any verbal acknowledgement. In the following scene which occurs in the company locker room, the most masculine of spaces in an already testosterone-infused environment, another coworker demands sotto voce that Roy “take those goddamn things off,” to which Roy responds by telling the man to “mind his own goddamn business.” The other man physically removes the earrings from Roy’s ears, inciting a physical

altercation between the pair, of which Roy is ironically the physically larger and stronger man.

While the content of this exchange itself and the close-up shots of Roy's wounded expression and barely-restrained tears cause the scene to read as sad and despairing overall, I would suggest that it also offers the film's first glimmer of hope that Roy's new identity may eventually become acceptable even in an all-male environment. The man who originally smelled Roy's perfume pulls the other coworker off of Roy and drags him away, and although his hands are visibly shaking, Roy replaces the earrings on his ears. Significantly, the camera depicts no further negative reaction from anyone, other than Roy's protector's softly muttered expletive "Jesus Christ" accompanied by sadly shaking his head. The camera leaves this reaction deliberately out of focus, however, narrowing in on a close-up shot of Roy's face, suggesting that the important message of this scene is not the violence and hostility it displays in response to gender transgression, but Roy's ability to survive and potentially overcome that hostility.

Irma's reaction to her first glimpse of her husband dressed fully in feminine attire offers further hope, adeptly balancing humor at the absurdity of the situation with genuine compassion and love. When Roy "comes out" (in his own chosen words) of the couple's shared bathroom, the viewer sees her reaction to Roy before seeing Roy, implying the thematic importance not of his appearance itself, but of Irma's reaction to it, which her face indicates is a mixture of laughter and pity. When he meekly asks her "what she thinks," Irma responds with the least cruel answer she can think of: "What can

I say? You look like my Aunt Loma after her stroke.” [Roy] “Do I look that awful?” [Irma] “Yes, honey, you do. You really do.” Her criticism of his improvised breast replacements is particularly poignant: breasts are among the most significant secondary sexual characteristics attributed to the female gender, and in this early stage of his female presentation, Roy has failed to “get it right”: “[Irma] You gave yourself boobs. What’d you use, Kleenex?” [Roy, grinning] “Bubble wrap.” [Irma] “Uh-huh. Well, you’ve got the shape all wrong.”

Roy attempts to explain the woeful state of his new wardrobe by describing his forays into local thrift stores, “just grabbing whatever looked right and hoping it fit,” an experience that is undoubtedly familiar to any person who has conducted gender transition. He asks Irma to help him choose some more appropriate clothing from a catalog he hands her, again forcing another person to confront the physical reality of his gender identity, whether she likes it or not. Her response demonstrates the genuine compassion and love that she continues to feel for Roy: rather than angrily refusing to participate in what she believes to be a ludicrous endeavor, Irma agrees and begins to offer Roy genuinely constructive advice, suggesting that he choose blouses that don’t “accentuate [his] shoulders” or “make him look top-heavy,” asserting that “he has to work with what he’s got; we all do,” establishing a connection to Roy’s experience of womanhood that even with its many apparent differences, also mirrors her own.

The moment of connection is abruptly shattered, however, when Irma laments not having “the legs so she [can] wear short skirts”: Roy assures her that her legs are

“beautiful” and instinctively reaches out to touch them. Irma quickly scoots away from him on the bed, pleading “Don’t,” having apparently reached her limit of cognitive dissonance for one evening. When Roy says that all he wants from her is “some respect,” Irma verbally articulates the nature of this dissonance: she truly believes that the “truth” of Roy’s new female identity is fundamentally incompatible with the “truth” of the (heteronormative) past they have shared together:

Roy, I have given you my youth, I have given you your children. I have given you my full and undivided attention for 25 years. And now I’m giving up everything that I believe in so you can feel complete. So tell me, what more can you possibly want from me? ... It’s not awful, Roy; it’s what it is. And if I look at it hard enough, you’ve done the same for me. So now, give me the catalogs, because I’m going to pick out your clothes.

As clearly pained as she is, Irma is genuinely concerned with the quality of Roy’s female presentation; she wants to save him from humiliation beyond that which he has already experienced, a desire that seems difficult to interpret as anything other than real and enduring love. Roy clearly realizes this fact, as evidenced by the tears welling up in his eyes and his silent nod of gratitude.

The above scenes, the last exchange between Roy and Irma in particular, lead me to a discussion of the final feature that makes *Normal* a positive portrayal of transgender identity: as I have already discussed at some length, the film addresses the “effects that transgender identity, and the transition process in particular, have on people *other* than the transgendered individual” (Pawlak 94). I will conclude this chapter by examining a closely related topic: the movie’s depictions of “communities (families or other stable

groups) that demonstrate overt acceptance or celebration of non-binary gender identity” (Pawlak 93).

3.4-d. “I think it’s cool”: coming around to acceptance

Irma’s somewhat reluctant agreement to help Roy through the visual aspects of his transition is only the first step in the family’s (and the community’s) journey toward acceptance of his new identity as Ruth. Even before Roy changes his name and begins dressing as female at work, Frank drops by his office unsolicited, apparently just to make sure Roy knows that Frank “has nothing but the greatest respect for [him].” Roy returns the sentiment, and Frank leaves immediately thereafter, apparently ready for the brief moment of bonding to be over; Roy stares after him, slightly perplexed. It might be argued that Frank’s gesture is motivated more by his guilt about the date he has planned with Roy’s wife (that takes place in the very next scene) than by his genuine desire to make Roy feel accepted, but given that Roy himself suggested that Irma “have an affair ... [he] wouldn’t mind,” Roy’s experience of this brief moment (and, I would argue, the viewer’s) is likely to emphasize Frank’s expression of acceptance rather than his attempt to soothe a guilty conscience.

After Patty Ann’s comment that I mentioned previously about the similarity between her own and Ruth’s anatomy, Irma reaches another emotional breaking point, screaming that she “doesn’t want an apology; she wants her husband back,” another demonstration of her inability to reconcile her past knowledge of Roy with his current presentation as Ruth. After a touching exchange in which Ruth repeatedly whispers to

Irma, “I’m here; it’s me; I’m still here,” the next scene shows the couple making a large bed together, which has replaced the separate twin beds they had been sleeping in; this image of domesticity simultaneously queers the heteronormative ideal (it is two *women* making the bed, and not a man and a woman) and asserts that at least on some level, heteronormativity has been restored: the married couple is again sharing a bed, despite the queerness of their respective gender identities.

The next scene demonstrates Irma’s unquestionable arrival at acceptance:

Reverend Muncie visits the house to check on Irma, relating to her “how much everyone has missed her at church” and parishioners’ inquiries about what they can do to help. Irma confronts the Reverend about the underlying tone of his chatter, pointing out that she is “not a widow” to combat the displacement that he seems to be performing of Ruth, attempting to pretend that she doesn’t even exist. He concedes the point, though he then immediately escalates the problem by telling Irma, “as [her] pastor and as [her] friend,” that he “gives her permission to separate her life from [Roy’s]...to walk away.” Irma’s response shows that she has realized what is truly important to her, in her marriage and in her life: “But he’s my heart. My heart. My heart.” Her love for Roy is finally able to transcend her psychological difficulties with his transition and new identity, and she has chosen a potentially challenging continued life with Ruth/Roy over an even more painful one without him. The scene fades to black immediately after her declaration, rendering any kind of response the Reverend might give as superfluous.

Family holiday gatherings seem to induce stress and tension even in the best of circumstances; understandably, Thanksgiving dinner at the Applewood home is tense, to say the least. The “prodigal son” figure of Wayne has returned home for the first time since the start of his father’s transition, and despite Irma’s determined effort to follow the “happy family dinner” script, the cognitive dissonance becomes too much for Wayne to handle. To Ruth’s attempt to make him feel comfortable by asking if there is anything he wants to ask or talk about, Wayne responds with typical transphobic ignorance, attempting to categorize his parents’ sexual relationship by saying to Ruth, “so as a man, you’re straight, but as a woman, you’re gay?”

This is certainly a common question posed to transgendered people; as I discussed in Chapter 2, the association between gender and sexuality is a difficult one to dismantle, and many cisgendered people are simply unable to manage such conceptual ambiguity in the absence of clearly defined labels that seem to adequately describe reality. Ruth attempts to educate Wayne (and the audience) by saying that “Irma happens to be the person [she] loves,” regardless of Ruth’s own gender; the proper sexual label to assign to such a relationship seems unimportant to her. Wayne continues to press the issue, however, insisting that continuing to share a bed with Ruth will make Irma a lesbian, and then saying that he “gets women with women,” that “maybe [he] is a lesbian too.” Ruth scolds Wayne for his sarcasm, but this angers Wayne, and he retorts that he is “too fucking confused to be sarcastic.”

It soon becomes evident that as much as he is concerned for himself, Wayne does possess some empathy for Irma; he asks her if she is “revolted” by, or “actually likes [Dad] as a woman,” to which she responds that she likes having him “alive,” highlighting her realization of the absolute necessity for Ruth’s well-being of her ability to express an authentic gender identity. Her answer angers him even more; when Ruth enters the room and offers Wayne Roy’s old watch, Wayne refuses the watch and all of Roy’s possessions, cruelly calling Ruth a “half-baked cunt.” Ruth slaps him in the face, ordering him “never to use that word again,” which Wayne immediately does, inciting the film’s second outbreak of physical violence, which culminates in Ruth giving him a bloody nose. She immediately apologizes and attempts to tend to his wound, but Wayne initially rejects her help.

Finally, though, he does relent, and sits down next to his father on the stairs, Ruth wiping Wayne’s bloody face with a towel and saying she would “never hurt [Wayne] for the world,” a very obviously maternal scene of tenderness. Wayne finally breaks down in tears himself, saying only the word “Dad” before being enfolded in Ruth’s arms and reassured, like Irma before him, that his father is indeed “still there.” In visual rather than verbal terms, Wayne too comes to acceptance, which seems, like Irma’s, to rely on the knowledge that whatever her outward appearance may indicate, the person he has grown up knowing as his father still exists and still loves him.

Ruth’s last and potentially most emotional confrontation with her family takes place with her parents; her mother greets Ruth with tears in her eyes but is unable to

muster the strength to embrace her. She does the best she can to be loving, however, taking Ruth's purse for her, and pointing Ruth into the den where her father sits in his wheelchair. The conversation between Ruth and Roy Sr. seems to be the film's attempt to acknowledge that some people may simply never be psychologically capable of acceptance; Roy Sr. is only able to comprehend the notion that he has five daughters (and thus, no son) as a result of his rapidly declining mental state; he is unable to remember even his own wife's name. In addition to depicting the struggles that transgendered people have in receiving their family's acceptance, this scene also illustrates the pain involved in watching one's own parents reach old age and approach death; Ruth's emotional pain is evident on her face when she realizes that her father still believes his own father to be alive and just outside, in the barn.

In perhaps the film's most moving piece of dialogue, Ruth finally confronts her father about his harsh treatment of other people throughout his life and overall failure to acknowledge the love they have shown him, in his refusal to even *name* them (as he has ostensibly failed to name Ruth, his daughter):

That woman over there is your wife. She's been married to you for 50 years ... Her name is Em. She's borne your children and cooked your food and stood behind you in everything you did, no matter how misguided or stupid or cruel. She's old. And she's tired. And she still bathes you and feeds you and changes your soiled pants. The least you can do is call her by her name.

Still unable to fully acknowledge Ruth's words, Roy Sr. retorts that he "doesn't want her [Em]; [he] wants his mama," who has been dead for many years. In a heartbreakingly weak and trembling voice, Roy continues to ask for his mother, refusing the sandwich

Em offers him because he has again soiled his pants. In an ironic and touching reversal of roles, Ruth offers to change her father, declining his own mother's offer of help and urging her to "get some rest." Here again, at least some degree of the standard nuclear family narrative is restored, though with the child caring for the parents instead of the other way around; this seems indeed to be the closest Ruth may ever come to real acceptance from her parents. But, for the moment at least, it seems to be enough.

3.5. Conclusion

Despite their differences, both of the films examined in this chapter do try to paint authentic portraits of the transsexual experience; both feature protagonists whose narrative and personal journeys end with the realization of their dreams for sexual reassignment surgery. *Transamerica* offers a much more narrow and stereotypical version of transgender identity, continually emphasizing Bree's efforts to conform to the two-gender system, despite all the difficulties inherent in fulfilling that desire. *Normal*, by contrast, provides a much more nuanced vision, acknowledging the very real complicating that gender transition does of the traditionally-held boundaries between male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, and belonging and ostracism.

Ultimately, we might hope for a future film portrayal of transgender (or even more real-life encounters) resembling the one that Kate Bornstein describes as taking place between herself and a neighbor child two days after Bornstein and her lover appeared on *The Phil Donahue Show* in a segment about transgendered people:

Two days after [the show], the five-year-old child of our next-door neighbor came up to me and asked me, "So, are you a boy or a girl?" We'd been living next door to these folks for over two years. "I'm a girl who used to be a boy," I replied. She was delighted with my answer and told me I'd looked very pretty on television. I thanked her and we smiled at each other and went about our days. (9)

CHAPTER FOUR: *IS IT ALL JUST AN ACT?* DRAG PERFORMANCE AND GENDER IDENTITY

4.1. Introduction: A 'Different' Kind of Female Impersonator

In contrast to contemporary cultural images of men dressing and performing onstage as women, the dominant trend in early nineteenth-century gender impersonation was for *women* to perform as *men*; female impersonation, the predecessor to contemporary drag performance, did not dominate the scene until the late 1800s.⁸⁶ The first half of the twentieth century in America featured what Bullough and Bullough term “the drab female of the music hall or the brassy vaudevillian” (235); well-known performers of this time period included Charlie Chaplin, Stan Laurel, and Groucho Marx (whose first job in vaudeville was as a female impersonator). Later versions of female impersonation shifted away from the loud and garish appeal of vaudeville and toward the performance of “beautiful creatures who emphasized charm and delicacy” (235), like Julian Eltinge (born William Dalton, 1882-1941), Karyl Norman (born George Podezzi, 1897-1947), and the circus female impersonator Barbette (born Vander Clyde Broadway, 1904-1973). Bullough and Bullough describe these stars as exemplifying a “different” kind of female impersonator who “no longer burlesqued women but who acted or appeared to act as a woman. This is sometimes referred to as ‘glamour drag,’ and it demands much more realistic impersonation than had been done in the burlesque or music hall” (237).

⁸⁶ For an excellent comprehensive account of the history of cross-dressing from antiquity through the contemporary period, see Vern L. and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

This sensibility largely informed the drag shows that began to appear in American nightclubs, which eventually became associated with homosexuality and the gay community (even though not all performers whose acts featured female impersonation were gay themselves). As the gay community developed into a collective of individuals needing an intelligible way to recognize each other, one common means to achieve such intelligibility was the performance of “exaggerated femininity”; in fact, in the years before gay and lesbian bars were allowed to advertise publicly, “one way of announcing that gays would be welcome would be to feature a female impersonator of one sort or another” (239).⁸⁷

Another function of drag performance within the gay community has been its association with prostitution; for this connection to become clear, it is important to recognize the stigmatizing effects that accompanied public identification as a homosexual, particularly in the case of passive or receptive homosexuals. Gay men have traditionally had two available means of responding to this stigmatization: they can publicly conform to heterosexual norms and/or downplay the existence of their

⁸⁷ One noteworthy aspect of the assumption many drag shows made of a primarily gay audience was their tendency to demonstrate, in the words of a frequent woman attendee of drag shows from London to Provincetown, “not only a virulent misogyny and a cruel travesty of the feminine but were a humiliating experience as well” (Bullough and Bullough 239). She goes on to suggest that drag performance need not *necessarily* be so degrading to women and might in fact serve as an opportunity to speak *for* them; many drag shows aimed at “tourists” (ostensibly, a non-homosexual general public) did just that:

Drag artists in South London nightclubs now play for all-female audiences, “hen parties.” Tommy Osbourne commented that the “audience sees drag artists as surrogate women, voicing their hidden feelings.” Cross-dressing makes it possible for him to function as a shamanistic figure of release: “Mind, if a man told the jokes I do, they would think it rude. But with a man dressed up as a woman, they scream back” (Showalter 166-67). (The quotes from Tommy Osbourne come from Joy Melville, “The Ladies Let it All Hang Out,” *The Guardian*, 19 July 1988.)

I shall address examples of both misogynistic and woman-empowering discourses in the two films discussed in this chapter as they arise.

homosexual identity, processes that Yoshino refers to as passing and covering (772), respectively, or they can “flagrantly embody the socially imposed stigma of the effeminate male by becoming drag queens” (Bullough and Bullough 239). The decision to conform or resist often depends in large part upon social class, but even when it does not, assuming the drag queen role tends to limit employment opportunities and channel individuals into being professional performers or prostitutes or both. These two career paths are viewed somewhat differently within the gay community, though both acknowledge the financial benefit that results from avowed homosexuality: “The drag queen who goes on stage flaunts his homosexuality in an economically successful and somewhat respectable way; the drag queen prostitute might be equally economically successful but much less respectable” (Bullough and Bullough 240).

In her landmark ethnographic study of female impersonators, Esther Newton was careful to point out that not all drag queens are prostitutes, and not all male prostitutes are drag queens. Within the broad category of drag queen, one finds both “professional” and “amateur” performers, the professionals being those who earn their living as female impersonators:

Professional drag queens are, therefore, professional homosexuals; they represent the stigma of the gay world. Not surprisingly, as professional homosexuals, drag queens find their occupation to be a source of dishonor, especially in relation to the straight world. Their situation in the gay world is more complex. The clever drag queen possesses skills that are widely distributed and prized in the gay world; verbal facility and wit, a sense of “camp” (homosexual humor and taste), and the ability to do both “glamorous” and comic drag. In exclusively gay settings such as bars and parties, drag queens may be almost lionized. But in public – that is, any domain belonging to the straight world – the situation is far different.

Female impersonators say that in public, they never “recognize” a homosexual whom they know unless they are recognized first. (Newton 3-4)

Despite the fact that they rely on their impersonation skills to survive, drag queens do seem to be aware of the ongoing stigma against homosexuality among the general public, and the gay bars where they perform continue to offer a safe space that is somewhat protected from the hostile pressures of the straight world.

The realm of drag performance may seem at this point to be clearly distinct from real life as well as from the definition of transgender that I have employed thus far: the above analysis suggests that men who are (nearly always) homosexual and choose to reject conformity with heterosexual norms adopt drag performance as a means of financial support that has no particular connection to or frequent effect on either their sexual or gender identity. However, It is important to point out that Bullough and Bullough’s account of cross-dressing and homosexuality was published in the early 1990s, and Newton’s study even longer ago, in 1972. I would suggest that public attitudes about homosexuality, drag performance, *and* gender have become even more tolerant in the years since then; I have attended drag shows in the past decade whose audiences contained a significant number of straight-identifying men and women, in addition to diverse visual presentations of both sexuality and gender.

Additionally, the ever-increasing prominence of online social networking allows drag performers to extend their performances beyond the bounds of the stage in ways that interestingly complicate the relationship between performance and real life. For example, I am personally acquainted with several (homosexual) drag queens whose Facebook

profiles use their stage names and feature photographs of the queens both in and out of “costume.” The performers also often refer to each other using female pronouns and stage names in general social interaction, even when they are out of costume and non-performers are present; both of these examples imply, as do the passages I cite from Phillips and Baudrillard in Chapter 1, that the strict boundary between performance and life may in fact be far more permeable than audiences assume.

If the first major “shift” in drag performance is chronologically situated in the post-WWII period and described as the point when homosexuals began to outnumber heterosexuals on the stage, a second such “shift” can be identified in the late 1960s, when the first pre-operative transsexuals began to join the ranks of professional drag queens. In an interesting contrast to the three coordinating definitions of transsexuality I described in Chapter 1,⁸⁸ Bullough and Bullough focus their conception not on what is *different* about the transsexual from the cisgendered woman, but on what about the two is *similar*, implying that the transsexual drag queen is in some ways “more like a real woman” than the cisgendered man who performs alongside her:

Preoperative transsexuals can be defined as those individuals who no longer depend upon makeup and waist cinchers to create an illusion of femininity but have turned to female hormones to develop their breasts and give them more feminine curves and have undergone electrolysis treatment to remove hair and beards ... This trend was accentuated in the 1980s, and probably the majority of the tourist shows feature preoperative transsexuals who have natural breasts and feminine curves, even though

⁸⁸ I identify transsexuals “by the dis-identification they experience with the gender label attributed to them at birth”; Stephen Whittle describes a person who “experiences a profound sense of incongruity between his/her psychological sex and his/her anatomical sex. Transsexual people wish to change the anatomical sex, through hormones or surgery, to match the internal perception of their bodies” (66). Finally, Garber argues that “[t]ranssexualism is not a surgical product but a social, cultural, and psychological zone” (106).

technically to perform as a female impersonator they retain their male genitalia. (244-45)

One reason transsexuals may have been drawn to drag performance is because it could offer the more skilled performers a chance to earn the money required for SRS, as both pre-op and post-op transsexuals often have difficulty securing stable and lucrative employment. Also, it seems naïve to ignore the obvious link between transsexuality and performance: many “medical model” transsexuals desire surgical transition because of their concurrent desire to “perform” the social role attributed to their new gender, a performance that they seem to believe incomplete or inauthentic as long as they possess male genitalia. In the absence of their (internally) perceived ability to pass completely as female, drag performance might offer such individuals the “next best thing” to actually “being” a woman: the glamour and fashion and exaggerated femininity aspects of performance allow them, at least for a time, to completely submerge themselves in the woman role, temporarily either forgetting their anatomical maleness or pretending it does not exist.

We might convincingly argue that the last distinct evolution in cross-dressing culture is still occurring in this country: beginning with the Stonewall riots in New York City in June of 1969, cross-dressers have achieved and held a position of significant visibility within the gender and sexuality community. The three-day-long series of confrontations between police and various factions of the gay, lesbian, and cross-dressing community was led by a group of what Newton terms “street fairies,” cross-dressing male prostitutes generally perceived as a more highly stigmatized social class within the

homosexual community than stage impersonators. One result of the Stonewall Rebellion important to this discussion was the increased politicization of cross-dressing itself; this cultural evolution came to be known as genderbending or, more colloquially, “gender-fuck” (Bullough and Bullough 246).

The most significant feature of genderbending is *not* its attempt at authenticity; genderbenders generally do not create their visual appearance with the intention of presenting a convincing or passable version of *any* particular gender. Rather, the emphasis is on ambiguity, deliberately blurring the boundaries and binary opposition between “male” and “female,” a

confusion of costume whereby the illusion of assuming the opposite sex is not intended to convince the viewer of authenticity but to suggest ambiguity. Since it also involves women as well as men, the viewer could not be certain whether the person was a man or a woman. Gender-bending not only represents a challenge to traditional gender concepts but also to cross-dressing as it previously existed in the gay community. (246)

I raise the idea that genderbending as a cultural evolution is still occurring because its emphasis on ambiguity parallels the recent (post-1990) theorist and activist rhetoric I have previously cited. Many such thinkers argue that gender equality will depend upon the acceptance of an increase in *both* the number of available gender identity labels *and* the expression/performance of gender androgyny; as I discussed in Chapter 1, Dvorsky and Hughes’s postgenderist world will rely significantly on widespread acceptance of such androgyny.

To return to the topic of popular culture representation, I have outlined the evolution of drag performance over time to illustrate the point that even within very

highly scripted realms of gender performance, a certain degree of transgression continues to exist and in some cases, even be encouraged. The history of images of drag and cross-dressing in popular culture is well-documented, and I shall not recount it here; instead, I will proceed directly to the mid-1990s, which serves as the chronological setting of both films discussed in this chapter. In her examination of transgendered images in 1980s and 90s American popular culture, Gordene MacKenzie focuses mainly on the mass media, in particular the afternoon talk show, to demonstrate the effect that media portrayals can have on the general public's perception of transgendered people.

While the non-fictional or "reality TV" aspect of the daytime talk show assumes at least some degree of fidelity to real life that may be less compulsory in fictional narrative film, MacKenzie's assertion about the representations themselves holds true for film portrayals as well:

Since most of these images are media generated and reach large audiences, they have the power not only to reflect culturally biased beliefs about gender but also the potential to shape them. In most cases, sensationalized media portrayals of transgenderists have little to do with the day to day reality of most transgenderists and everything to do with the ratings and sales of popular cultural products featuring transgenderists ... The major focus [of this chapter] will be on what cultural ideologies are being conveyed through these representations as well as an analysis of audience reactions to them as a measure of contemporary gender attitudes in America (103)... While mainstream depictions of transgenderists are often confused with gay characters, due to the director's ignorance or intent to confuse sex and gender, gender minorities, like sexual minorities, are routinely demeaned and negatively stereotyped in the mass media (108)

This argument assumes that most transgendered *images* are created by non-transgendered *sources*; indeed, MacKenzie makes this point explicitly, comparing transgendered people to other cultural minorities in the fact that both groups "have little control of mainstream

media” (108). With these two ideas in mind, that of popular culture’s ability to shape and even create audience perceptions and the tendency of transgendered representations to issue from non-transgendered sources, I shall move on to my discussion of the first of this chapter’s two films featuring drag performance: 1995’s *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*.

4.2. *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (1995): “I Do Not Think of You As A Man, and I Do Not Think of You As A Woman - I Think of You As An Angel”

4.2-a. Manly ‘girls’: hypermasculine actors ‘playing’ at drag

From the moment its first theatrical trailers were released, *To Wong Foo* was characterized as pure fantasy: its highly recognizable male leads, Patrick Swayze and Wesley Snipes, had both gained the entirety of their prior fame from performances in hypermasculine, action hero roles. One such trailer shows Snipes violently assaulting a punching bag while a voice-over intones, “He’s been a killer and a commando,” followed by Swayze throwing a series of martial arts kicks while the voice-over informs us, “He’s been a heartthrob and a hero.” Both are then introduced as facing their next major challenge – drag (Sauter 38). In one sense, this separational positioning of actor and role illustrates what Newton highlights as one of drag’s defining features:

By focusing on the outward appearance of role, drag implies that sex role and, by extension, role in general is something superficial, which can be manipulated, put on and off again at will. The drag concept implies *distance* between the actor and the role or “act.” (2006: 121-30, emphasis in original)

Lest the audience forget the hypermasculine associations of the film's lead actors and become engrossed in their feminine performances, *To Wong Foo's* marketing campaign reasserted the actors' masculinity and ultimately their heterosexuality at every available opportunity.

The actors themselves even participated in this discourse: in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Swayze declared emphatically, "I don't have anything to prove ... I am as heterosexual as a bull moose. That is what made me so comfortable as Vida" (Daly 35). He made similar claims in *The Advocate*, a prominent gay and lesbian magazine: "[E]verybody knows that I am seriously, terminally heterosexual" (Busch 52).⁸⁹ This sense of "comfort" derives from exactly the same awareness of fantasy that the film as a whole embodies; as Kathryn Kane argues,

[H]is comfort is a result of the character, which was not so much a homosexual as a heterosexist social fantasy. Swayze and Snipes' real identities, and this real includes their public personas and movie histories, are, in fact, central players in the film's narrative. As one reviewer notes, "There's never a moment in this film when the audience isn't absolutely reassured that, should things get really bad, Patrick Swayze and Wesley Snipes will tear off those silly dresses and kick some serious ass"⁹⁰ ... Casting such proven and recognizable heteronormative stars allows the audience can be certain that the film represents play, not identity. (166)

The film succeeds by continuously reaffirming not its lead actors' queerness, but their *straightness*, reminding the audience that it need not worry about the decline of masculinity in contemporary America; these men are, after all, "just playing."

⁸⁹ These statements seem ironic when juxtaposed with the story of how Swayze earned the role of Vida Boheme: "by improvising a 30-minute monologue inspired by the bullying he suffered as a boy studying ballet in Texas" (imdb.com).

⁹⁰ Grant Alden, "Dragging the Line: To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar." <http://www.film.com> (site now discontinued).

4.2-b. Gender and sexuality: not the same thing

The first aspect of the film that merits critical examination is its attempt to conflate gender performance and identity with sexuality: if the film is attempting to offer some kind of “authentic” portrait of homosexual drag queens, it commits some serious conceptual errors that seem very likely to perpetuate public hostility toward both homosexuality *and* transgender identity. First, the distinction between the characters’ “queen” personas and their male personas strongly counters the very essence of what makes drag performance *a performance*. The opening scene mirrors the opening scene of *Transamerica* and shows both male leads completing their “transformation” from men to women. The first shots feature Patrick Swayze’s clearly male nude form exiting the shower covered only by a strategically placed bath towel; he then sits down in front of a mirror and examines his masculine face in a stereotypically feminine way, complete with high-pitched sighs of dissatisfaction and exaggerated head and shoulder movements.

The scene continues on to alternate between Swayze and Snipes’ dressing routines, featuring close-up shots of the body parts most often associated with femininity in American culture: lips, eyes, breasts (which in this case, are clearly shown to be artificially created), and smooth legs clad in nylon stockings. By itself, this scene might be effective in creating a sense of both cognitive dissonance and the uncanny in the viewer, perhaps inspiring a serious interrogation of the constructed nature of gender: highly masculinized actors donning excessive makeup and female clothing, wigs, and accessories is certainly visually jarring.

However, the problem inherent in the way the film unfolds from here is that it never shows the drag queens taking their costumes *off*: from this first scene until the final credits roll, all three protagonists maintain their feminine performance on a permanent basis, undermining their status as drag queens, an identity that depends upon its audience's recognition of drag as a performance that *contrasts* with reality. As Mary Kirk points out in her combined analysis of *To Wong Foo* and Mike Nichols' 1996 film *The Birdcage*,

Although both films attempt to use drag as a locus of discovery, they achieve only limited success since they muddy the distinction between drag queens (gay men dressed as women) and passing (men disguised as women, who are often referred to as transsexuals). Schacht (2002) defines "drag queens" as "individuals with an acknowledged penis, who have no desire to have it removed . . . that perform being women in front of an audience that all knows they are self-identified men" (159). Feinberg (1996) describes "passing" as "having to hide your identity in fear, in order to live"—making passing a product of oppression, rather than an escape from it (89) ...

[W]ith the exception of two scenes when the men are seen without their wigs, the characters spend nearly the entire film in drag and dressed as women. This makes it questionable whether film viewers are supposed to believe that the characters are drag queens (who appear as women only for performances). The standpoint is unclear, since these characters who are never seen out of female attire might more accurately be depicting preoperative transsexuals. Or, are Vida, Chi Chi, and Noxema "passing" in the sense that Feinberg describes—hiding their identities as gay men to be safe? Throughout most of the story it seems clear that the other characters are completely unaware that the drag queens are men in women's clothes. (172-73)

In other words, the film fails to draw a distinct boundary between transvestite, drag queen, gay man, and transsexual; it seems to have simply borrowed elements from each of the four identities that seemed most amenable to comedic portrayal, thus failing my

test for positive portrayal in its exploitation of gender queerness for purposes of farce or comedy.

Since Hirschfeld first coined the term “transvestite” a century ago, scholars have continually affirmed that not all transvestites are gay men; in fact, *most* identify as *heterosexual* (see Krafft-Ebbing, Ellis, and more recently, Benjamin, Garber, and Shepherdson). Further, as I previously mentioned, transvestism is generally associated with eroticism, its practitioners generally assumed to engage in the activity because it provides sexual gratification of some kind; this association is completely absent from the film (as is explicit sexuality in general, as I shall discuss shortly). Drag queens do indeed *tend* to be homosexual, as Newton discovered in the 1970s, but as both Newton and other gay studies scholars point out, not all gay men are drag queens. Like transsexuality as a smaller subset of transgender identity, only a small percentage of gay men perform as drag queens, often to the chagrin of the more mainstream and conservative members of the gay community who want to maintain as much distance as possible between themselves and what they see as damagingly stereotypical expressions of homosexuality.⁹¹

Also problematic is the way the film associates homosexual and drag queen identities: Snipes’ character Noxema Jackson, the epitome of stereotypical black femininity, makes repeated references to the group’s personal safety as they travel through small-town (conservative) America: “I don’t know if you’ve seen this America

⁹¹ In *Mother Camp*, Newton provides a comprehensive ethnographic study of the relations between different elements of both the female impersonator and the gay community, highlighting the often hierarchical nature of these interactions and perceptions.

place, but it does not respond kindly to our kind of people,” and Vida expresses reluctance at Chi Chi’s suggestion for a hotel, saying that “it’s just so middle America”; Noxema even suggests sleeping in the car as an alternative to entering what all three have coded as a highly heteronormative environment, making explicit the potential threat of violence: “People are gonna be cruel to us; it could get violent. Vida, you know, we have been there before.” When Chi Chi rebels against such restriction and prances into the hotel anyway, Vida laments that “the child is going to go and get herself killed.”

While this scene can be read as the film’s attempt to acknowledge the existence of real prejudice against both homosexuals and people with alternative gender identities, it fails to explain exactly which aspect of their identities the trio is afraid will incite discrimination or even violence. If we assume that their homosexuality is the perceived “problem,” it seems strange that the characters would travel cross-country in such a flamboyant visual fashion. Homosexuality is not culturally identified with cross-gender clothing and accessories, both of which are *visual* markers; it is associated with sexual desire and behavior between people of the same gender, which are *behavior*-based markers in whose absence homosexual identity would be virtually unintelligible to the general public. If they wanted to closet their homosexuality, as I have previously suggested many gay men and lesbians do in order to gain access to the public (heterosexual) sphere, the protagonists could easily have worn men’s clothing on their journey and brought their drag accessories with them; as the “default assumption” for sexual identity in this culture is heterosexuality until otherwise indicated, three

masculine-appearing gay men in traditional male attire would draw virtually no notice at all.

However, it seems much more likely that their status as “men in dresses” is the “secret” the trio wishes to hide from the general public: all of the film’s scenes of “concealing and revealing” of the characters’ biological sex, and *not* their sexual orientation, lead to significant plot developments of both a positive and a negative nature. When Sheriff Dollard (ironically dubbed Sheriff “Dullard” by each of the characters he encounters as a result of the misprint on his police badge) pulls the trio over and attempts to sexually assault Vida, she demands in a masculine voice for him to “Get [his] hand off [her] dick!” and shoves him to the ground; this leads to the sheriff’s ongoing quest throughout the rest of the film to locate his so-called “assailants,” termed by himself and by the other officers to whom he reports the incident as “men in dresses” and “girls,” respectively.

The beginning of this scene also demonstrates the film’s overall failure to actively queer heteronormative notions of identity or suggest that the three protagonists view their drag queen personas as constitutive of their core gender identities. The source of Vida’s anxiety at being pulled over stems not from her identity as a homosexual, nor from her presence in a car with two people of color (which is apparently the *actual* reason the sheriff pulled them over) but her identity as a biological (cultural) *man*. Throughout the film, all three characters refer to themselves and each other using *only* female names and pronouns, and Noxema seems genuinely surprised to learn that “the name on [Vida’s]

driver's license is Eugene," implying that in spite of an apparently longstanding acquaintance and mentoring relationship, the pair have *never* discussed the biological fact of their shared maleness or verbally acknowledged it. The film surely has insufficient narrative space to devote to the entire genesis of Vida's drag queen persona and her identification or lack thereof with alternative gender identity, but the fact that her license still identifies her as male implies that despite the consistent maintenance of excessively female presentation, Vida still thinks of her "authentic" or "legally official" gender identity as male.

At the end of the film, Vida attempts to reveal her "true" identity to Carol Ann, a central figure in the town of Snydersville, where the queens' rented car breaks down early in the story. In a much more positive reaction than the previous example, Carol Ann does not even allow Vida to finish her confession, simply assuring Vida that she (Carol Ann) "is very fortunate to have a lady friend who just happens to have an Adam's apple," which Carol Ann reveals that she noticed on the queens' first night in town.

This blurring of boundaries between very different types of identities is among the film's most grievous sins, as Kane argues:

The director's substitution of gender for sexuality is troubling. It is not that [director Beeban] Kidron is unaware of the various forms of sexual and gendered identity. After all, this taxonomy is at least summarily covered in the film, in a speech that Noxema makes to Chi Chi ... "When a straight man puts on a dress and gets his sexual kicks he is a transvestite. When a man is a woman trapped in a man's body and he gets a little surgery, he is a transsexual. When a gay man has way too much fashion sense for one gender, he is a drag queen. And when a little Latin boy puts on a dress, he is simply a boy in a dress." Kidron's aforementioned quote only makes sense in a culture that regularly conflates transvestites and

homosexuals and in a film where the lines quoted above are the only clarifying references to Noxema and Vida's sexuality. Tremendous border wars are waged among gay/lesbian and transgendered communities.⁹² Claiming a clear position within these fights, Noxema and Vida are drag queens and gay men. But, failing to reflect the borders with any specificity, this movie panders to social ignorance and promotes the conflation of transgendered and homosexual identities. (167)

The film presents a version of homosexuality that is freed from the dynamics of the gay closet that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes in *Epistemology of the Closet*,⁹³ which suggests the critical nature of the connections in our society between sexuality and visibility as well as a number of other binary pairings that, as Kane says, "hold the modern social order in place."

Such an arguably "false" portrayal of homosexuality "structures a false vision of equality as it denies the current systems that control sexuality. So constructed, *To Wong Foo* cannot represent the impact that sexuality structures have on people's lives" (167). Despite her above-quoted self-identification as a gay man, even Noxema makes comments that seem to denigrate gay sexuality: when Vida declares that Chi Chi accepting Bobby Ray's invitation to the social is "absolutely out of the question," Chi Chi argues that "[they've] got a lot in common." Noxema concurs, but expresses a strong anti-gay sentiment: "Oh yes, like, for starters, the same business in between your legs! Boink, boink, boink-boink-boink," touching her index fingers together in a crude pantomime of gay sexual contact, suggesting how implausible she apparently finds the

⁹² See Pat Califia, *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1997); C. Jacob Hale, "Consuming the Living and Remembering the Dead in Butch/FTM Borderlands," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 2 (1998): 311-348.

⁹³ (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990).

idea. In addition to its unrealistic portrayal of both homosexuality and transgender identity, the film offers messages about both race and gender roles that are alternately troubling and uplifting, as I shall discuss in the next section.

4.2-c. Angels with queer faces: parody and divinity

This section will rely primarily on Kane and Joyce Hammond's readings of *To Wong Foo*; the authors come to virtually opposite ultimate conclusions about the film's artistic and social merit, but they do so through examining almost identical aspects of its content. Therefore, I apply again Gallop's idea of placing two authors (or texts) in conversation with each other to reveal what is hidden when they are examined separately, highlighting the key points of difference in the authors' interpretations and how each sees the film as meeting (or failing to meet) my criteria for a positive portrayal of transgender identity.

In addition to her criticism of the film's conflation of the markedly different identity categories of gender and sexuality, Kane's argument examines the discursive relationship within the film between queer (sexual *and* gender) identity and race, ultimately suggesting that the film parodies the blackface minstrel tradition of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America to a degree that "erases" the important differences between queer and non-white identity.⁹⁴ Kane situates this erasure within the larger tradition of neoliberalism that Lisa Duggan describes as "a pro-market, pro-

⁹⁴ In much the same way that Calhoun argues that gay and lesbian identity is displaced or "erased" by heterosexist cultural norms.

business position that seeks to end redistributive social programs” (xi-xii), arguing that such a political approach is ultimately detrimental to social justice objectives because it “involves denying that social identities carry specific burdens and the need for socially disadvantaged groups to form alliances” (Kane 152). The fact that upon the film’s release, “no particular attention was given to the interracial casting” reflects the apparent public sense that in contemporary America, race no longer matters,⁹⁵ even as a number of films, *To Wong Foo* among them, continue to “reflect racist ideologies” (153).

Kane highlights two major similarities between the blackface tradition and *To Wong Foo*, the first of which she explains using the term she calls “queerface,” a trope that secures heteronormativity while “queer voices are silenced through the performance of homosexuality by people who act out a vision of homosexuality while simultaneously identifying themselves as heterosexual” (157). This silencing or erasure of queer voices in *To Wong Foo* takes place in the same way as in *Transamerica*: the affirmed heterosexuality and gender-normative personas of the lead actors in both films (Felicity Huffman in *Transamerica*; Swayze and Snipes in *To Wong Foo*) erase queer people’s opportunity to speak in their own voices and create a “vision” of transsexual or homosexual identity that the audience recognizes only through a heteronormative filter. Kane is careful to point out that she is not advocating a “politics that says only gay people can play gay characters” (157); I also do not make such a claim about transgendered people being the only group capable of portraying transgendered

⁹⁵ This “post-racist” ideal has persisted long past *To Wong Foo*’s release: Kane cites David Roediger’s “cogent analysis of the way the Obama campaign was misrepresented as a sign of the United States reaching a ‘post-racial’ status” (153); David Roediger, afterword to *How Race Survived American History: From Settlement to Slavery to the Obama Phenomenon* (New York: Verso Press, 2008).

characters.⁹⁶ Queerface's significant feature, however, is the ways in which it draws attention to the narratives that structure the way gays and lesbians operate; it "involves representing gay/lesbian sexual identity as a playful performance that supports heteronormative ideals" (157). The idea of queer identity as a playful performance detracts from its cultural intelligibility as a legitimate and complex reality, allowing the audience not to take it seriously, just as Kane argues that the film fails to do.

One major difference between blackface and queerface is the limits placed on the performance of each identity: as I discussed in Chapter 3, racial identity and gender identity have important fundamental differences in how both become marked as "Other." Both forms allow people not included within a particular identity category to "act like" a person of that identity; Roediger and Eric Lott both discuss blackface's allowance of white people to "act black,"⁹⁷ and queerface performance allows heteronormative people to "act queer," but the differences in epistemological structure between race and sexuality limit these "acts" in important ways. As I discussed in the last section, race, though widely agreed to be socially constructed, is still marked by the *visual* cue of a person's skin color, while sexual identities are imagined to be the product of a person's *actions*.

This is not meant to suggest that sexuality is determined only or entirely by an individual's sexual actions; I suggest merely that the dominant means by which sexual

⁹⁶ Kane points out that black characters can perform blackface, as depicted in Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled*.

⁹⁷ Davis Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso Press, 1991) 105; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 4.

identification becomes intelligible is through sexual object choice, and homosexual identity is perceived as becoming actualized through the act of having sex with a person of the same gender. Given this difference, blackface performance can be adopted simply by a white actor applying color to his/her face, thus signaling blackness without actually *becoming* it. Queerface, on the other hand, cannot utilize similar types of visual cues in order to signal queerness, since that identity depends on behavior. As Kane argues,

Queerface cannot act out the central distinguishing feature of homosexual identity because heterosexuality cannot be secured in the same way that whiteness can be secured ... [I]t is constrained by the awareness that if those in queerface act so queer as to participate in same-sex sexual contact, they cease to be *performing* queerness: they *become* queer. (158, emphasis added)

In their complete avoidance of any sexual contact (or even, for the most part, verbal declarations explicitly concerning their own sexual identities), the characters of Vida and Noxema in particular avoid recognition as queer *subjects*, remaining carefully in the realm of queer *performers*, or “performers of queerness,” a recognition that is substantiated by the highly heteronormative public personas of both actors.

The second connection between blackface and *To Wong Foo* is the film’s dual privileging of whiteness and heterosexuality, which allows

a small, almost exclusively white and indicatively heterosexual community to actualize itself through contact with and, eventually, separation from sexual and racial others ... [and] connects *To Wong Foo* to traditions established in blackface minstrelsy. This link is evident in the film’s attempt to create the illusion that race, sexuality, and identity ... are terms that exist outside of power ... Ironically, however, it simultaneously posits that people of color need to be overseen by white people and that homosexuality is only acceptable when it is devoid of any same-sex sexual contact. (Kane 155)

In other words, the citizens of Snydersville are able to achieve increased satisfaction and fulfillment in their lives as a direct result of the arrival of “sexual and racial others.” The film includes numerous scenes showing the integration of the queens into the town’s social structure, including their participation in planning for the annual Strawberry Social, Vida’s intervention in multiple incidents of domestic violence between Carol Ann and her abusive husband Virgil, and Noxema’s friendship with Clara, an elderly woman who has apparently not spoken in years, leading the townspeople to assume she is insane.

However, this fulfillment is completed only by the townspeople’s eventual *separation from* the queens: rather than embracing queerer ways of being and/or integrating the queens into their community on a permanent basis, they achieve narrative closure by *re-affirming* white, heterosexist values and norms. For example, Chi Chi decides to abandon her love for Bobby Ray, telling young (white, biologically female) Bobbie Lee that “[she] can go ahead and take him,” restoring the heterosexual couple as the “proper” form of social union, that institution “considered precious but contested by white society” (Lipsitz 65). Rather than accepting Vida’s invitation to accompany the queens to Los Angeles, and despite the “years [she] has spent dreaming about how to get out of this place,” Carol Ann decides to stay in Snydersville because she “has these girls to raise,” suggesting the cultural primacy of the monochromatic (and heterosexual) small town as the ideal “family” environment. In a shot during the aforementioned social, the three queens stand on their balcony overlooking the festivities, clearly delighted with their contributions to the fun, but also clearly *separate* from the community that is having it.

The film casts racial difference in particular in highly problematic ways, especially given the above description of its suggestion that race “doesn’t matter.” First, it offers explicit bigotry to indicate “the rigid limits around the dominant culture’s views” (Kirk 170); the character of Sheriff Dollard “continue[s] a mass media tradition that Archie Bunker made famous in the 1970s—the bigot as a mirror upon which is reflected the ugliness of racism, sexism and homophobia” (171). From his misprinted name badge to his racial epithets to his beer belly, Dollard is the quintessential racist homophobe; when he pulls the queens over and discovers Noxema and Chi Chi in the car with Vida, he admonishes Vida that “[w]e don’t go in for white girls riding around with niggers and spics.” His “investigative strategy” to find the queens after Vida knocks him unconscious and the trio leaves him lying on the side of the road involves listing a collection of “Places for Homos” that includes “flower shops, ballet schools, flight attendants lounges, restaurants for brunch, and antique stores.”

As the film’s official buffoon, Dollard is clearly intended not to be taken seriously, his obvious prejudice meant to offer viewers advice about how *not* to behave. His ultimate function, Kirk argues, is to represent the common fear of all bigots: when he makes his way to Snydersville and attempts to find the queens, the townspeople refuse to surrender them for arrest. When they do,

[T]he bigoted sheriff’s greatest fear is revealed: [he says] “Don’t protect these freaks; these boys in dresses, corrupting you with their way of life, changing the way things have always been.” This represents the underlying fear of all guardians of institutionalized prejudice who will do anything to keep from changing the way things have always been. (172)

Overall, Sheriff Dollard is perhaps the least troubling example of sexual and racial bigotry in the film: at least he is clearly identified as the “villain,” whose ramblings are meant to be satirical and ultimately reviled. However, the film’s more problematic statements about race come from much subtler and more dangerous sources: the sexual and racial minorities themselves.

Early in the film, Vida is established to be an ultimately sympathetic character: the audience watches her steer the classic convertible into her hometown and park in front of her parents’ house, followed by a close-up shot of her mother expressing clear recognition and then disdain as she hurries back into the house and shuts the door. Later, bolstered by the townspeople’s overt support of their attempt to elude Sheriff Dollard, suggesting their acceptance of the queens’ queer identities, Vida says she would “like to drive to Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania and walk into that imitation Tudor-style house ... And I will say, ‘My name is Miss Vida Boheme, and your approval is not needed, but I will take your acceptance.’” As the queens are preparing to leave town and Carol Ann says, “I love you, Miss Vida Boheme,” Vida responds gratefully, “I’ve waited my whole life to hear those words said to that name,” an interesting potentially queer moment if the viewer pauses to wonder which of Vida’s gender identities Carol Ann is speaking to and/or how she means the word “love.”

In spite of these moments of genuine pathos, the fact of Vida’s whiteness is repeatedly coded to indicate her position of power in relation to Noxema and Chi Chi, both members of racial minorities. From the beginning of the movie, Vida is visually and

thematically sutured to the photographic image of Julie Newmar, real-life (white) actress and pinup girl whom Vida refers to as “the only Catwoman,” a subtle snub of African-American actress Eartha Kitt, who replaced Newmar in the role on the *Batman* television series in 1967. This suturing occurs through successive third-person and first-person camera shots showing Vida preparing to look into her compact mirror (third-person) and then seeing not herself but Newmar reflected in it (first-person). Noxema’s voice emerges midshot, saying, “I don’t know if you’ve seen this America place, but it does not respond kindly to our kind of people,” to which Vida responds as she glimpses Newmar in the mirror, “No one say anything frivolous for the next few moments.” Kane suggests that

[t]his line is timed to cast Noxema’s comments about the heterosexism, racism, and gender rigidity of the U.S. as frivolous ... [T]he adoption of the photo’s inscription as the film’s title establishes Newmar’s importance to the film as a whole. In so doing, the text indicates a structure of whiteface; it speaks over the voices of people of color and gives undue authority to white ones ... The movie’s title ... places Vida’s view in a position that obstructs both Noxema’s and Chi Chi’s, exemplifying a pattern of prioritizing and privileging Vida’s white perspective. (160)

The theme of things having to be “Vida’s way” persists throughout the film, from the fact that only Vida is ever shown driving the rented car, to her declaration that “tomorrow will be a say-something hat day” which Noxema and Chi Chi both obey, to the mentoring role that she repeatedly reminds both Noxema and Chi Chi belongs to her alone.

Vida’s mentoring takes a decidedly non-color-friendly tack on numerous occasions, beginning with her and Noxema’s first encounter with Chi Chi after the pair have tied for first place in the New York City drag competition: when she sees Chi Chi sitting on the stairs and crying, Vida wonders aloud, “Why is that little Latin boy in a

dress crying?” Rather than ask the question herself, however, she tells Noxema to “ask the little Latin boy in a dress why is he crying,” a simultaneous avowal of her own position as authority figure and Chi Chi’s non-whiteness and *disavowal* of Chi Chi’s female, or at least, drag queen, identity.

Indeed, Vida and Noxema both assert the inauthenticity of Chi Chi’s drag queen persona relative to their own, with much of this inauthenticity attributed to her race. Vida establishes herself as the “mistress” of the training that *she* declares will take place, citing the “rule” that drag queens “have to help other people,” and Noxema as her “overseer,” a term that Kane uses “in a self-conscious attempt to link this narrative to racist systems that came before it ... Noxema ... is always ultimately under Vida’s control” (162):

Yes, you will start off a mere boy in a dress, but by the time we are done with this crusade your Auntie Vida and Auntie Noxie will give you the outrageous outlook and indomitable spirit that it will take to make you a full-fledged drag queen. So now, I want you to turn your sway-back little self around on those Robert Clay knockoffs, and get back into the car.

As it turns out, the nature of the “crusade” largely hinges on convincing Chi Chi to “accept her social position as a racially derided subject, a ‘sway-back,’ and to teach her how such a subject might make herself more palatable within a system that values and rewards whiteness ... [and to] make her racial identity less apparent” (162-3).

Noxema also fails to escape the rule of Vida’s whiteness: her drag persona’s name is taken from a thick, *white* face wash, clearly connecting to what Kane calls the tradition of whiteface, wherein

people of color are encouraged, not mocked, for their attempts to act white. This creates an image of social opportunity. This is only an image, however, because nothing has been done to disrupt the ... ideology that ties people of color to pre-industrial pleasure, something that casts [them] as a libidinal, pleasure-driven group who can never fully embody whiteness. (159)

Like Vida's visual merging with Julie Newmar, Noxema's function as Vida's Pygmalion is also established through the use of mirrors: in the speech where she attempts to convince Noxema that it is their duty to take in Chi Chi, Noxema is seated in front of a vanity table looking into a mirror, through which the audience sees her reactions to what Vida says. This composition visually reinforces the idea that Noxema's image is itself an object warranting concern, and that Vida's words "help her see herself more clearly" (163).

Additionally, this scene casts racism in general as a problem that is *experienced* by non-white people, but that can be *overcome* by the powers of whiteness:

[Noxema] "You and your causes! Look, that child is Latin. You don't want to get mixed up in all that Latin mess. She might turn out to be a Sandinista or something.

[Vida] "Noxema Jackson! I have to admit that I am shocked and just a little bit saddened by you. I mean you, of all people. Hon, I remember the first time I laid eyes on a certain ebony enchantress in the rough, and how through styling and the occasional make-up tip I helped her look a little bit less like Moms Mabley. And who would think that ebony enchantress would one day share a title with *moi*?"

Kane suggests that Noxema's "racial rejection of Chi Chi lends credence to the idea that racism, when it is a problem, is a problem created by people of color" (164). Vida's comparison between Noxema and Moms Mabley is also ironic: Mabley was an actress in the Chitlins Circuit, an early twentieth-century America bastion of blackface minstrelsy,

known for her Negro vaudeville stage persona who “wore a baggy house-dress and sported a toothless grin” (Violante 23G). Vida’s equating of Noxema’s present carefully crafted visage with such a contrasting image implies that Vida believes Noxema’s “true” nature to be much less refined than her current state, and only her (white) guidance will prevent Noxema from slipping into her “old ways.”

In one of the trio’s most serious moments of conflict (which results from Vida’s decree that Chi Chi must not “go out with Mr. Bobby Ray”), Vida and Chi Chi both launch verbal attacks that employ overtly racist language: Chi Chi says she is “just so sick and tired of this freakazoid white lady tellin’ the black lady and the Latin lady which way is up, down, and under because she is Vanilla White Superior” and states her intention to stay in Snydersville after the car is repaired. Noxema pithily concedes, reminding “Miss Jennifer Holliday” not to “forget to write”; Vida is not content with Chi Chi’s attempted expression of autonomy, however, and snidely comments to Noxema that Chi Chi “clearly has a piñata for a head.” Noxema attempts to defuse the situation, telling Vida “not to go there,” and Chi Chi refers again to Vida’s racial identity, calling her “an oppressive gringa with a pinga ... an uptight, cellulite dinosaur fossil-faced white honky cracker.” Not to be outdone, Vida snaps back, “Now you listen to me, you little sway-back, Third World selfish, self-absorbed little girl off the street”; finally, Chi Chi explicitly names Vida’s ongoing application of white privilege: “*You’re* the selfish one, running into people’s houses and bossing their lives around with them not even asking you, okay, Mrs. Dear Ann Landers, pain in my cula!”

This tense moment is interrupted by sounds from the next room of Virgil assaulting Carol Ann, and Vida immediately declares that the queens “have to help her,” suddenly deflating the “angry white master” persona she has spent the last few minutes creating. This time it is Noxema who criticizes Vida’s perception of herself as arbiter of others’ behavior, arguing that “there are times when you help people. And then there are times when *if* you help people, you end up being killed.” Clearly echoing the self-preservational rhetoric of oppressed minority groups, Noxema suggests that the ostensibly universally “good” act of helping others is worth doing *only* when it involves a significantly low cost to the rescuer. When that rescuer holds less cultural power than the person she attempts to rescue, the consequences to herself might be dangerous indeed; this is a position that Vida is unlikely to have experienced in her life as a result of her white racial identity.

In strong contrast to Kane, Joyce Hammond offers a reading of *To Wong Foo* that understands the queens not as heteronormatized robots whose every act is an attempt to restore or maintain white heterosexual privilege, but as creatures of a *much* higher level of enlightenment, titling her essay “Drag Queen As Angel” to emphasize what she sees as the literally divine aspects of the role. Largely ignoring the racist and sexist tropes that Kane identifies, Hammond ultimately suggests that the film’s most powerful message is the advocacy of tolerance and acceptance of diversity; to accomplish this, the film

irreverently usurps the moral/religious argument against gay men and lesbians and sends a message that urges a spiritual transformation in people's attitudes and practices and a transcendence of individual differences in the quest for a shared humanity ... [T]he highly visible,

deviant character of the "drag queen" [is] an angelic messenger/catalyst capable of effecting change in the moral precepts and practices of "everyday, middle Americans" ... [T]he persona of the drag queen is particularly well suited to the angelic tasks of messenger, guardian, and miracle worker. (107)

Hammond does not utterly fail to observe the border-troubling aspects of the film's drag performances; rather, she seems to simply prefer to cast them in a more positive light than Kane, allowing for a more favorable reading of the film as a queer text.

As I mentioned before, Kane's strongest criticism of *To Wong Foo* is the film's tendency to conflate different types of minority identity, which ultimately erases the important discursive differences between them and allows the audience to absorb inaccurate and/or negative perceptions of homosexual and transgender identity.

Hammond does not deny that the film performs this conflation; she seems to agree that it does so and actually uses that conflation to support her argument for the film as an ultimately positive portrayal of difference:

The message of shared humanity is not conveyed through erasing differences: the film focuses on characters of different ages, abilities, races, and classes, not to mention sexual orientations. Rather, in larger-than-life, angelic terms, the alternative message to blind conformity, prejudice, and ignorance is one that mirrors the drag queens' own transformative and transcendent responses to rigid, dogmatic categories of gender and sexual expression. (112)

Both authors identify the film's lack of specificity in distinguishing between various types of identity, but Hammond argues that this is among *To Wong Foo*'s strengths, rather than its weaknesses.

Kane's second claim identifies troubling parallels between the film's performance of both queerface and whiteface and the blackface minstrelsy tradition. Queerface is problematic because of the discursive distance it creates between the performance of queerness and queer identity itself, which allows the audience to interpret the entire performance as "play" that is not intended to reflect some larger truth. The main factor contributing to this distance is the lack of explicit sexuality attributed to queerface performers, in this case, the three overtly heterosexual male lead actors; Kane cites the need of all three men to perform queerness without actually engaging in queer (sexual) acts; by doing so, the characters would no longer be performing queerness but "becoming queer."

Hammond too acknowledges the film's omission of bodily sexuality in relation to the queens, but again, she comes to a different conclusion than Kane regarding that omission's significance. Rather than resulting in the "queer vision of gay life" that Kane describes (165), Hammond argues that the queens' lack of sexuality is an indication of their divinity, having transcended so-called "earthly" desires and experiencing themselves on a level that is more spiritual than corporeal:

Homosexuality as identity is rooted in a recognition of the sexed body and bodily acts, but the transcendence of the body into the realm of the spiritual is being increasingly highlighted within the gay community in an era in which so many gay men die untimely deaths.⁹⁸ This, coupled with the inspirational creativity that is ascribed to many gay men in the arts (of whom drag queens qualify as consummate self-costumers and dramatic performers), lends an "aura" of drag queen transcendence over the

⁹⁸ For extended discussion of homosexuality in relation to religion and spirituality, see Bouldrey, O'Neill and Ritter, McNeill, and Roscoe.

physical and material needs of life. The drag queen mediates between the physical and the spiritual realms.

[T]he characters in *To Wong Foo* are portrayed to maximize their likeness to angels. Verbal allusions to their attraction to other men aside (emphasized only for Chi Chi), the three are depicted as essentially asexual in their activities. They all seem to be without sexual partners, and they only refer explicitly to sexual acts in the film. (110)

Drag queens' capacity to move "beyond" the physical and into the spiritual realm places them in an ambiguous position *between* recognized status quo categories, strengthening their association with the realms of the mysterious, the sacred, and the taboo⁹⁹ and placing them in the position of eliciting the transformative properties associated with the liminal.¹⁰⁰

Queerface also often features over-the-top performances of gender or sexuality; this idea is explicitly stated at the end of the film during the Los Angeles drag competition when a voiceover proclaims the fourth rule of being a full-fledged drag queen: "Larger than life is just the right size." Kane suggests the possibility of such exaggerated performance to be read by the audience *only* as parody and thus dismissed, but Hammond again finds the bright side of this potential disadvantage, identifying the queens' larger-than-life personas as being among their angelic qualities:

⁹⁹ Mary Douglas conducts a comprehensive examination of what she terms "purity" (in the sense of sanctity or freedom from pollution) and the contrary "taboo" (resulting from *impurity*, or contamination) within religious communities in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Praeger, 1966); see also Edmund Leach, *Culture and Communication: The Logic by which Symbols are Connected* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1976).

¹⁰⁰ Victor Turner's conception of liminality refers to the position of a given individual or small group relative to a larger society (usually the society whose norms are dominant within that individual or group's life), describing these people as "liberated from normative demands...betwixt and between successive lodgments in jural political systems" (13).

A significant characteristic shared by drag queens and angels is their out-of-the-ordinary, larger-than-life appearance. Descriptions of some angels depict them as towering and gigantic. As female impersonators, the drag queens of *To Wong Foo* are larger-than-life females. ... Traits commonly ascribed to angels are extraordinarily beautiful faces, majestic and powerful wings, and a wondrous and mysterious radiance--an unearthly beauty matched by superior strength, purity of spirit, and incredible deeds. As extraordinary beings in the film, drag queens augment their larger-than-life look through exaggerated make-up, outrageously showy wigs, extravagantly theatrical clothing, and fantastic accessories. ... Rising majestically above the pettiness of routine, constrictive human life is what being an angel or a drag queen is all about. (110-112)

Rather than reading the queens' feminine performance as ironic or indicative of camp,¹⁰¹ Hammond categorizes it as the feature that draws the townspeople to them so strongly and allows them to have such significant and long-term effects on the community.

Another topic addressed by both Kane and Hammond is the film's negotiation of boundaries; in particular, the boundaries between both different identity categories and different identities within those categories, and the boundaries between the queens and the community members with whom they interact. I have already discussed the first of these three sets of differences by pointing to the film's conflation of different identity categories, about which Kane and Hammond draw largely opposed conclusions. Hammond draws attention to the second of these pairings, the boundaries between different identities within the *same* categories (in this case, those of gender and sexuality) by arguing that the film meets my criteria for positive portrayal of transgender of including "onscreen conversation about gender identity that highlights characters' [or

¹⁰¹ For a discussion of the complex relationship between *To Wong Foo* and camp, see Alex Evans, "How Homo Can Hollywood Be? Remaking Queer Authenticity from *To Wong Foo* to *Brokeback Mountain*," *Journal of Film and Video* 61:4 (2009): 41-54. I shall return to Evans's argument in the next section as it also discusses *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*.

other people's] perceptions of themselves as simply 'not fitting' the male-female binary, either occasionally or permanently" (Pawlak 91).

Hammond explicitly describes the queens as occupying a space that might be imagined as either "outside of" *or* "between" the traditional categories of male and female, created by their overt juxtaposition of masculine and feminine attributes, which Hammond describes as ultimately "androgynous," exactly the term I suggested in Chapter 1 to characterize the postgenderist world that this project envisions:

Another trait frequently ascribed to both angels and drag queens is androgynous essence. In Christian theology, angels are frequently described as androgynous in both demeanor and appearance. Even when they are clearly identified as masculine, they are often described and depicted as "feminine" in appearance by the standards of Western society—beautiful countenances, long hair, and flowing robes are associated with such famous angels as Gabriel, Michael, and Rafael.

While drag queens do not attempt an androgynous image and consciously exaggerate "feminine" behavior, the viewer's knowledge that the drag queens are biological males who wear make-up, dresses, high heels, and wigs; use feminine names and mimic feminine speech and behavior parallels the combination of male and female elements in the expression of androgyny. (108)

As I said before, the queens never refer to themselves as men; even their acknowledgements of drag queens' homosexual identity use third-person pronouns ("When *a* gay man has too much fashion sense for one gender...").

However, Hammond's idea about the ability of other people to recognize the queens as some type of gendered "third" certainly seems plausible, given Carol Ann's parting words to Vida at the end of the film: "I do not think of you as a man, and I do not think of you as a woman. I think of you as an angel." Vida's response clearly seems

intended to suggest that the viewer should share Carol Ann's perception; she says happily, "Well, I think that's healthy!" This celebration of androgyny also reflects the reverence given in other cultures to people with alternative gender identities:

The figure of the drag queen as a spiritual being is analogous to the recognition of the spiritual characteristics of certain people in a number of other societies that have recognized and sanctioned alternative gender roles. The hijra of India (see Nanda); the "two-spirit" people of native American groups (Williams); the yirka-la ul of the Chukchee people of Siberia (Bogoras), and the mahu of Hawaii (Williams) have all been associated with supernatural and mediatory powers as a consequence of their "in-between" gender status. Marjorie Garber, Will Roscoe (*Zuni*), and Judy Grahn, among others, have documented the spiritual aspects of cross-dressing, same-sex relational individuals from a wide variety of cultures. (110)

In the midst of an apparently highly heteronormative film, Hammond manages to identify a decidedly more queer interpretation of the drag queens' identities than that offered by Kane.

The final point of Hammond's argument I shall discuss in this section is her description of the queens as performing a "mediatory" function throughout the narrative: both angels in various cultural narratives and the drag queens in *To Wong Foo* are positioned as separate from, and in a sense, "above," the other characters with whom they interact, both "crossing" and simultaneously "creating" a boundary between themselves and mere mortals:

Just as angels serve a mediatory role between heaven and earth, God and humans, so the drag queen mediates between male and female, heterosexual and homosexual. ... [D]rag queens position themselves between the posited bipolar entities of male and female. They also mediate between the spiritual and physical dichotomies that Western society creates. As individuals who do not conform to the gender norms and

sexual expectations of their biological sex, drag queens are, by the accepted norms of society's predominantly bipolar structures, neither man nor woman. (109-10)

Vida herself makes statements that imply her own perception of drag queens in general as in some way outside the boundaries of human society: her justification for “not allowing” Chi Chi to accept Bobby Ray’s invitation lies in her assertion that “[t]here are human rules by which we operate, sweetheart.” Early in the film, at the start of Chi Chi’s training, Noxema exclaims indignantly that not just “anyone” can be a drag queen; four distinct “steps” must be completed to achieve “full-fledged drag queen” status: “thinking good thoughts, ignoring adversity, abiding by the rules of love, and acting larger than life.” Both of these examples demonstrate that for Vida and Noxema, a drag queen identity is *not* one by which a person comes naturally, nor is it one to whom every aspiring “princess” may be granted access. Rather, drag queen status exists separately from “normal” human society, allowing those who *do* achieve it a power to influence others in powerful ways.

4.3. *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994): “Just What This Country Needs: A Cock in a Frock on a Rock”

4.3-a. A question of intention – drag’s relationship to the feminine

Drag performance has at best a complicated relationship to the cultural construction of femininity: critics argue alternately that drag tends toward misogyny and gynophilia¹⁰² or that it is an ultimately subversive (and thus progressive and potentially

¹⁰² See Tincknell and Chambers (2002); Brooks (1999); Phillips (2006).

liberatory) act in its potential to reveal the constructed nature of gender in general.¹⁰³ The defining difference between these two perspectives seems to be the function that critics assign to drag performance within the film narrative, whether they assume the filmmaker's intent is to create an ironic parody of femininity or to "defy victim-centred feminism by asserting the dominance of women in the universe" (Paglia 99) and effect a corresponding subversion of masculine dominance. Depending which interpretation a critic chooses, drag performance can be characterized as either a positive *or* a negative portrayal of gender transgression, as the readings I discuss in this section will demonstrate.

Tincknell and Chambers argue for the former, suggesting that the film reveals its misogynistic and gynophilic attitudes toward femininity and by extension, women, in its marginalization and/or exclusion of women from central plot developments: "[W]hile the film attempts to critique some aspects of the misogyny of drag culture, at the heart of the film are a profound gynophobia and a residual attachment to ... traditional gender roles" (154). The focus throughout the film is on men and male bodies (even in the case of Bernadette, who though she identifies as a male-to-female transsexual, is clearly coded in a masculine way through actor Terence Stamp's recognizability as a biological male) and privileges male experience at the expense of women's experience: "[T]he marginalization of women is ... complete. It is as though the transfer of the spectacular elements of the genre to male bodies is part of a greater process of exclusion" (152). Even when women do appear in the film, they are represented as a "threat or a source of fear" (154), which

¹⁰³ See Butler (1999); Garber (1992).

ultimately gives narrative “power” to the male characters and their perspectives and positions them as the intended target of identification for the viewer.

Tincknell and Chambers also point to the queens’ drag performances themselves as caricaturing the feminine:

Throughout the film Tick and Adam foreground this performative relationship to femininity by their parodic stylization of it as grotesque ... [and] a series of comic turns, from the “slags” of the Outback through prima-donna musical comedy stars to the American black southern “mammy.” (153)

Drag has subversive *potential* in its ability to reveal the constructed nature of gender, but in this case that potential is unrealized because the queens only perform versions of femininity that are meant to be read as “extreme” in their carefully crafted imitation of various cultural stereotypes of women.

Brooks’ reading focuses less directly on film’s depiction of women in particular and more on what she views as its overall marginalization of transgender identity:

Though these films offer a form of resistance to stereotypes and social attitudes, they ultimately reinforce the marginalization of transgenderism, thereby reducing their subversive potential (1) ... Unfortunately, the power that [*Priscilla*] has to challenge gender and sexual constructions is lost in the overt racism and misogyny that it embraces, placing it once more within an exclusive masculinist and heterosexual paradigm. (3)

She also argues that the film suggests the preferability of men as companions over women, citing repeated instances where the queens are granted access to spaces and levels of acceptance that are denied to “real” women (Shirl in the pub; Cynthia, Bob’s Filipina wife). Regarding drag performance specifically, Brooks says more than once that the film “turns transgenderism into a fetish” (5) by casting well-known heterosexual

actors to play the drag queens and depicting the queens as continually marginalized on the basis of their overt performance of gender transgression.

As a result of these “dual meanings” assigned to the characters, they “appear to maintain the boundaries of the cultural matrix that expels or denies alternate sexualities and identities” that Butler describes in the following terms:

The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of "identity" cannot "exist"--that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not "follow" from either sex or gender. "Follow" in this context is a political relation of entailment instituted by the cultural laws that establish and regulate the shape and meaning of sexuality. Indeed, precisely because certain kinds of "gender identities" fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain. (1990: 17)

Because the queens are both identifiable as real-life heterosexual men conducting a “performance” of transgender identity and shown within the film narrative to be socially marginalized, they are “able to exist within the film and outside of its parameters as well” (Brooks 5) and allow it to be commercially successful.

Finally, Phillips also reads drag performance as a caricature, describing the queens’ performance as a

parody of femininity, a male joke for other men, that far from subverting masculinity, reinforces gender polarity through caricature and excess. ... [W]e are never allowed to forget that beneath the carnivalesque mask of woman is a man. Indeed, much of the humor associated with drag depends on the audience’s awareness of this duality ... The explicit campness of drag invites an ironic rather than a sympathetic reading of femininity, which is donned as a jester dons his fool’s cap and bells. (129)

The juxtaposition of masculine and feminine in drag performance is dominated by the appearance of the masculine, ever reminding viewers that the man is always ultimately in control, an idea which reinforces and serves the interests of heterosexist norms rather than challenging them. Drag also upholds heteronormativity through the audience's ongoing recognition that it is only ever a performance and not intended to be read as "real," a relationship more akin in stylistics to simile than metaphor. As Paul Ricoeur explains, "[N]o transferal of meaning takes place; all the words keep their meaning and the representations themselves remain distinct and coexist with an almost equal degree of intensity" (236). In other words, A (the act of cross-dressing) is *like* B (femininity), but does not ever actually *become* it, a mere likeness that retains its original underlying identity rather than replacing it with a new (and more threatening) one.

In contrast to these interpretations of drag as an ultimately negative portrayal of gender transgression, many scholars cite Butler's conception of drag,¹⁰⁴ which attempts to complicate readings that describe it as demeaning to women or reproductive of gender stereotypes. Instead, she argues,

The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance ...

¹⁰⁴ In the preface to the 1999 (revised) edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler clarifies her view slightly, saying that her discussion of drag is "not precisely *an example* of subversion. It would be a mistake to take it as the paradigm of subversive action or, indeed, as a model for political agency" (xxiii). Rather, "Drag is an example that is meant to establish that 'reality' is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be. The purpose of the example is to expose the tenuousness of gender 'reality' in order to counter the violence performed by gender norms." (xxv) Drag in itself is therefore not *automatically* subversive; theorists after Butler have simply used the example in the same way that Butler originally did: to point out its potential to actively counter expectations and norms about gender expression.

In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency. (1990: 187, emphasis in original)

In another of her well-known essays, Butler counters the notion that drag represents the adoption of a gender that belongs “properly” to some other group; rather, drag performance reveals the imitative nature of *all* genders:

Drag constitutes the mundane ways in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation. If this is true, it seems, there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but *gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an *effect* and consequence of the imitation itself. (1991: 313, emphasis in original)

Drag, then, is not *necessarily* demeaning to women or reinforcing of stereotypes because such readings assume an erroneously simple connection between “imitation” and “original.” If some “original and authentic” version of femininity could be proven to exist, drag might then be read as demeaning or parodying this “reality” by audiences unimpressed with its similarity to that reality.

However, Butler argues that there *are* no such “real” genders: gender is *itself* performative in that it “constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express. It is a *compulsory* performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence” (1991: 314-15, emphasis in original). Newton also reveals the fabricating mechanisms that control the social construction of gender, arguing that drag performs a conceptual inversion that “effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity” (Butler 1999: 186), completely separating gender signification from the discourse of “truth and falsity”:

At its most complex, [drag] is a double inversion that says, “Appearance is an illusion.” Drag says, “[M]y ‘outside’ appearance is feminine, but my essence ‘inside’ [the body] is masculine. At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; “[M]y appearance ‘outside’ [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence ‘inside’ [myself] is feminine.” (Newton 103)

In other words, drag highlights the questionable nature of *both* conceptions of gender identity, one that sees gender as becoming intelligible through an individual’s performance of it, and the other that sees gender as some essential internal “truth” that is shared by all members of a given gender category. The outcome of this inversion is to emphasize the impossibility of imagining gender in terms of a given gender expression’s relationship to “reality” or “unreality”; no such reality exists. In the next section, I shall discuss the relationship of this version of “gender trouble” to the queens’ social positioning within the various cultural and geographical spaces they inhabit in the film, examining the ways in which their queered gender identities are either mainstreamed or relegated to marginal status.

4.3-b. In the center or at the margins? ‘Locating’ identity in the outback

In a move strikingly similar to both *Transamerica* and *To Wong Foo, The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (referred to hereafter as *Priscilla*) follows the narrative structure of the road movie genre that I discussed in Chapter 3.¹⁰⁵ Brooks argues that the queens’ “physical quest, in keeping with the road movie genre, synchronizes with a psychological journey” (1); Rama Venkatasawmy describes the road movie’s focus on “mobility and freedom...the impetus for this particular notion of

¹⁰⁵ Many critics initially assumed that *To Wong Foo* was meant to be a remake of *Priscilla*, an assumption that ultimately proved false, as I shall explain in this chapter’s conclusion.

‘journeying’ is generally triggered by: the Escape motive—from country, from the city, the past, family, ‘home’, authority or enemies; the Quest motive—for people, places, ‘home’, objects or understanding of self’ (75), and Hilary Harris calls *Priscilla* “the most important road film of the last twenty years in Australia that has attempted to create a narrative in which the normally (or, perhaps nominally) separate discourses of indigeneity and immigrancy are both featured” (99). With its emphasis on the concept of movement, both physical and psychological, the road or journey motif is central to both the film’s plot and its thematic content, as I shall explain in this section.

Filmed on location and written by native Stephen Elliott, *Priscilla* is very much an Australian movie, yet it also managed to gain significant cultural footing as a cult classic in the U.S., placing it within the scope of this project. A large part of the film’s appeal in foreign markets may be due to this very separation: according to Alex Evans,

Priscilla ... enjoyed massive crossover commercial success, its “independent” pedigree and “foreign” status in the United States and United Kingdom (it was geographically, as well as subculturally, exotic) tending to foster the perception that the film had crossed over from a subcultural position to become the more mainstream hit it later was—we might propose that *Priscilla*’s perceived geographical separation from US cultural hegemony had the effect of bolstering its gay subcultural credibility. (43)

Ann-Marie Cook points to the film’s often seemingly cruel and mean-spirited humor as indicative of its culture of origin, in which

the national funny bone is tickled by jokes that appeal to black humour, anti-authoritarianism, irreverence and self-deprecation. Refusing to take anyone or anything too seriously and relying on humour to get through difficult circumstances are widely regarded as throwbacks to the nation’s brutal convict past. (11)

The film's interactions between people of different national and sexual identities also parallel developments in 1990s Australian society: Harris argues that it "was made and released during a significant period in the distinct but related histories of indigenous and immigrant discourses" (99), and Tom O'Regan suggests that *Priscilla's* treatment of homosexuality seems "sensible against the background of the Sydney Gay Mardi Gras as a nationally televised event in 1994, the acceptance of gays in the military, the treating of gay couples as families in the 1994 census, and an anti-discrimination campaign combating homophobia" (262). Finally, Jennings and Lomine suggest that *Priscilla* also indicates an important cultural shift in the depiction itself of queerness in Australian film, asserting that "filmic representation of queer characters remained securely within the closet until the 1990s" (146).

Conventions of the road film genre structure the film's plot by creating an ongoing visual suture between the spatial (geographic) and the performance of gender:

[T]ick, Adam, and Bernadette travel across Australia into the "empty space" of the Outback where they will be tested, both physically and emotionally. The challenging and potentially transformatory qualities of the desert are part of the visualization of this inner journey offered by striking and dramatic images of the landscape. (Tincknell and Chambers 150)

The generally hostile conditions of the Australian desert here serve as a metaphor for the difficulties the main characters have already undergone in their performances of gender and suggest that they will surely encounter more; three individual landscape shots position the characters as physically tiny and insignificant compared to the massive

topographies that surround them, in much the same way that hegemonic gender norms attempt to dwarf and render insignificant any deviations from an ideal standard.

Brooks connects this spatial metaphor to Kristeva's abject, asserting that the characters' repeated utterance, "Shit, shit, shit" in each of these shots inscribes them as abject figures, refusing the "forces, metonymically represented by the landscape, which seek to contain them within a binary frame" (2). Rather than remaining static and allowing their identities to be defined by or subsumed within the hostile landscape, though, the queens embrace movement, which earns them a degree of legitimacy, however brief it may be:

In a "deviant" gesture of excess and transformation, Adam paints the bus lavender; Tick dresses in a lurid outfit of scaly green and dances in the wilderness--he refuses to blend into the landscape like the native "scaly" creatures with which the camera contrasts him. Bernadette, dressed in virginal flowing white, strikes off into the heart of the land; references to *Picnic at Hanging Rock* here are evident. These "girls," however, will not be lost or displaced. Their constant movement opens up a space where nature/culture, man/woman, male/female, animal/human are blurred. (2)

In their refusal to abandon their quest to reach Alice Springs, despite the mechanical obstacles that the rickety old bus continually creates, as well as their insistence on maintaining their gender-transgressing identities, regardless of how these identities are received by the backwards townsfolk they encounter, the queens embody the spirit of progress that defines the road movie, as the film's conclusion brings them to the achievement of both their geographic and psychological goals.

To further suture the main characters with the abject and emphasize their visual marginality, Brooks highlights the film's early placement of the characters only in "interior" spaces:

Visually and spatially they are confined to interiors: clubs, dressing rooms, a telephone box, and domestic spaces in inner city Sydney. A brief funeral scene, the first exterior space, further displaces the transgendered subjects to the periphery of the social world by aligning them with death--the ultimate in "abjection" (Kristeva 3-5). The corpse being buried is a ... reminder of the fragile boundaries that demarcate death and life. Similarly, the transgendered figure also hovers at the threshold between a series of opposites, blurring borders and destabilizing the boundaries between self and other. (2)

In their association with the abject, the queens are thus able to remain figuratively "outside" of the cultural matrix and refrain from disrupting it; the "transgressions" they do commit throughout the narrative are always viewed in a comedic manner, the framing of that comedy always governed by a "specular" recognition of what counts as "normality."¹⁰⁶

A final example of the connection between spatiality and marginalization occurs in the scene where the queens enter the bar at the Palace Hotel, where they arrive tired and cranky after a long day of traversing various geographic locations. Some critics¹⁰⁷ read this scene as indicative of the film's gynophobic tendencies, and while I do not entirely disagree with this characterization, I find the exchange more relevant to a discussion of how the queens negotiate various cultural spaces within the diegesis and

¹⁰⁶ See Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985).

¹⁰⁷ See Champagne (1997); Tincknell and Chambers (2002).

what leads to them being either accepted or marginalized. As Bernadette seats herself at the bar and very politely asks for a “Stoli and tonic, a Bloody Mary, and a lime daiquiri, please” (certainly an uncommon drink order in this small mining camp pub), Shirl, a stereotypical angry butch lesbian, enters and snarls at the trio, “Well look what the cat dragged in. What have we got here, eh? A couple of showgirls. Where did you ladies come in from? Uranus? We’ve got nothing here for people like you.”

It certainly seems difficult to avoid reading Bernadette’s response as gynophobic, violent as its imagery is, and issuing as it does from a person *lacking* the mentioned anatomy. Without missing a beat, she retorts, “Now listen here, you mullet. Why don’t you just light your tampon and blow your box apart, because that’s the only bang you’re ever going to get, sweetheart.” The entire assembled crowd, men and women alike, bursts into spontaneous laughter, instantly affirming the queens’ place within the temporary social structure. Emily Rustin sees this laughter at Shirl’s expense as allowing the men, a category that in this case, *includes* the drag queens, to bond by “affirming the humiliation of the local woman” (140), and Champagne points to the “sharing in this put-down of a woman by a former man” (83). In this case, the drag queens’ transgressive identity and appearance becomes less important than their participation in *another* set of cultural norms, what Cook terms the “brutal nature of Australian humour ... [which] is predicated upon generating laughs at the expense of others” and not necessarily an example of the film’s attempt to single out one particular group to abuse (1); ultimately it is *Shirl* who is marginalized, not as a lesbian but as a performer of bigotry herself, and the *queens* who are accepted. As Brooks argues,

A crude joke at [Shirl's] expense ... allows the three drag queens to blend into the crowd, sharing drinks, makeup tips, and history. Bernadette's "male" name "Ralph" is revealed in this scene, thereby permitting her participation and presence in masculine activities. So, despite the exotic presence and experience of the cross-dressers and the social relations that develop, they do not threaten the masculinity that dominates the pub. (3)

Cook explicitly refutes the reading of this scene as indicative of the film's overall misogyny or gynophobia, arguing that it actually discourages discord between marginalized characters: "[I]ll-will between socially marginalised, queer characters is symbolically punished in the narrative, thus I find it hard to accept the claim that the film's articulation of stereotypes represents an endorsement of either misogyny or white male privilege" (9).

4.3-c. Which camp is the best camp? The limitations of camp theorization

A common issue raised by critics about any film featuring queer content is the question of the film's relationship to a so-called "queer authenticity." Film critics often subject the films they review to comparison, often between the film and the perceived norms and conventions of the genre to which it belongs; action films are evaluated based on the quality of their explosions, special effects, and car chases; romantic comedies are judged in terms of how well they execute standard romantic tropes and achieve a fairy-tale ending.

Queerness in film, on the other hand, is not confined to a particular genre; queer characters and themes can appear in virtually *any* film, thus escaping subjection to some set of norms dubbed "conventions of the queer film." As a result of this lack of clear generic boundaries, a film's perceived queerness is most often compared to the *critic's*

(or perhaps, the *viewer's*) internal sense of what “authentic” or “real” queerness looks like. As Cook points out, “[I]t is ... important to question the extent to which claims about negative representations [of queerness] are actually a function of the *critic's* own worldview rather than an index of the *film's* ideological stance” (6, emphasis added). As I suggested in earlier chapters, the term “queer” is itself inclusive of a wide variety of identities, lifestyles, and ideological positions; as Alexander Doty explains,

Queer was not only meant to acknowledge that there are many different ways to be gay or lesbian, but also to encompass and define other sexually defined minorities for whom the labels homosexual and/or heterosexual were less than adequate: bisexuals, cross-dressers, transgendered people, interracial couples whether homosexual or heterosexual, disabled sexualities, sadomasochistic sexualities whether homosexual or heterosexual, etc. (2004: 5)

This multiplicity makes the task of deciding if a film is “sufficiently queer” or “correctly queer” an ultimately pointless one: a single individual’s personal criteria for queer authenticity would seem to hold no more weight than those of any other single individual, thus rendering a judgment of a film as a “good” or “bad” portrayal of queerness arbitrary and meaningless.

One common methodology for appraising queer films is to apply the framework of camp, or camp sensibility, a term that has persisted in pop culture discourse since the publication of Susan Sontag’s landmark 1964 essay, “Notes on Camp.”¹⁰⁸ Sontag distinguishes between what she calls “naïve camp” and deliberate “camping,” establishing a clear prioritization and order of authenticity in camp performance; Alex

¹⁰⁸ First published in the *Partisan Review* 31.4 (Fall 1964); re-printed in Fabio Cleto, ed., *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999) 53-65.

Evans humorously points to this hierarchy's obvious potential to create debates over which (or whose) camp is the "best" camp: "From this point on, critics have wielded handbags at dawn over who can find a more authentic version than the last" (47).

Interestingly, Sontag attempted to sever the connection between camp and homosexuality: she never even used the word "gay" in her essay, describing camp instead as "something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques."

Since then, however, various critics have re-established this link; Jack Babuscio describes it as a "gay sensibility" that finds articulation through irony, aestheticism, theatricality and humour and is rooted in a feeling of being at odds with the social mainstream where heterosexuality is "normal, natural, healthy behavior" while homosexuality is defined as "abnormal, unnatural, sick behavior" (121). Richard Dyer highlights camp's unique ability to function as a weapon against the assumptions and practices that define the norm in mainstream society: "[Camp] is precisely a weapon against the mystique surrounding art, royalty and masculinity: ... it demystifies by playing up the artifice by means of which such things as these retain their hold on the majority of the population" (52).

Cook argues that camp is an inherently political concept, despite some critics' misunderstanding of its aesthetic as merely shallow and mocking humor that fails to take some things as seriously as it should, suggesting that "[t]he trouble with this view is that it overlooks the fact that humour and superficiality can form the basis for social critique just as powerfully as serious drama does" (13). The basis of this power lies in camp's

combining of what Cook terms “surface-level wit” and what Babuscio labels “underlying hostility and fear [...] imbued with self-hate and self-derogation” (128). This hostility is directed at two sources simultaneously; first, at the society that would prevent gays from achieving equal status; secondly, in an *inward* direction, fostering ambivalence about gay people’s own bodies and the qualities therein that alienate them from the mainstream.

With its focus on disrupting mainstream norms, camp does seem an ideal frame within which to examine film portrayals of queerness; however, Evans summarizes the potentially interminable nature of the type of camp theorizing that seeks to identify certain texts or practices as “more” or “less” camp than others, and thus more or less authentic, a practice that proliferated among gay liberation theorists in the 1970s¹⁰⁹:

In practice, assignments of camp authenticity, or ontological status as “camp” to certain texts, and not to others, are far from arbitrary; however, such assignments are remarkably complex. Fitting them into “logical” or critical/theoretical frameworks of spectatorship and cultural production arguably tests these theories to the point of crisis. ... [C]amp tends to appear, or not to appear, in oddly disjointed, strangely discontinuous situations, which makes the holistic theorization of camp all the more unmanageable. (48)

The task, then should perhaps be not to determine whether a text is authentically camp or not, as this distinction is so inherently problematic, but instead to examine the ways that a text *uses* the discourse and practice of camp to advocate some ideological positions and critique others.

¹⁰⁹ See, for example, Babuscio (2004); Andrew Britton, “For Interpretation: Notes Against Camp,” *Gay Left* 7 (Winter 1978/79), rpt. in Cleto 136–42; Moe Meyer, “Introduction: Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp,” *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (London: Routledge, 1994) 1–28.

Virtually all applications of camp sensibility to texts' queerness raise the same underlying question which is perhaps the most important one, focusing on how a text may be *actually read* by an audience, as opposed to how one critic may arbitrarily apply a set of criteria to it: as Evans puts it, "what are queers supposed to *do* with ... cinema?" (49, emphasis in original). The essence of this question concerns the role of spectators themselves, and queer spectators in particular, in the reading (or, to use Mulvey's term, the "looking") process: they have the capacity to produce what Doty calls "historically specific cultural readings and uses of texts by self-identified gays, lesbians, bisexuals, queers" (xi), which produce responses in viewers that might be widely disparate in their degree of approval or disapproval of the text's portrayal of queerness.

4.3-d. Queer reception: how queer is *Priscilla*, really?

As one example of evaluating film in terms of how it attempts to disrupt heterosexist norms (or fails to do so) and what a viewer's response might be, Evans points to an interview Patrick Swayze gave after *To Wong Foo*'s release that emphasized his perception of the film's adherence to heteronormative customs, those that foreground the nuclear family and minimize sexuality in particular: "For me, it's a drag queen movie that reinstates family values ... We could never let this movie be about addressing sexual issues ... It had to be about people ... you [put] sex ... in a drag queen movie and you're gonna alienate 98 percent of your audience" (qtd. in Shulman). Despite its very apparent use of camp *imagery* (the queens' exaggerated speech patterns, gestures, and wardrobes), in this reading the film fails to effect a "real" disruption of heterosexist norms in its

apparent privileging of a family-centered, sexless version of gay (drag) identity, which seems to echo Duggan's assertion that homonormativity features queer people doing their best to "act straight."

Despite the claim that *Priscilla* is overall a "queerer" film than *To Wong Foo* and the very vocal praise it received from members of the LGBT community, many critics lambasted it for the same flaws attributed to Kidron's film, calling it a "racist, sexist and homophobic narrative" (Farrell) and a "limited, old-fashioned and unconvincing depiction of a drag show trio" (Mast). Others saw the film as "playing along with antiseptic myths about the delights of the gay lifestyle [while] paper[ing] over the difficulties of homosexuality" (Breen), arguing that "[t]he more radical queer viewers might have seen the film as another example of fag caricatures—little more than a gay minstrel show" (Murray), much like Kane's criticism of *To Wong Foo*'s parallels with the minstrel tradition. Chris Straayer refers specifically to the film's reconfiguring of the definition of family, suggesting that it "not only deconstructs a very odd nuclear family, but constructs an alternative queer family" (182), a potentially queer reading that Evans "straightens" by again likening *Priscilla* to Kidron's film: "Deconstruction it may be ... but the focus remains 'family,' and as such, *Priscilla* too might be considered as a film that reinstates 'family values'" (45).

While American queer politics remain divided on the issue of how much cultural importance membership within a family *should* hold (some feminists, for example, have valued the liberation of women *from* the family, while others, like Cheshire Calhoun,

advocate the liberation of women (and queers) *into* the family), the idea that a nuclear family is the most important or most “legitimate” type of community originates very much within heterosexist culture. In either case, a queer perspective can allow for at least a critical examination of, in Doty’s words, “both straight and non-straight sexualities in order to deconstruct the ways and means that patriarchal hegemony constructs and maintains the idea that only one sexuality (married-straight-white-man-on-top-of-woman-sex-for-procreation-only) is normal and desirable” (2004: 5-6).

The denial and erasure of queer sexuality is also cited as a feature that makes *Priscilla* less queer than it might be, particularly by critics like Evans, who attribute that erasure to a commercial desire to make film in general more “palatable” to mainstream audiences: “[T]here is certainly no denying that the ... asexual nature of the drag queens [in *To Wong Foo*] means that the film is less likely to offend Middle America ... [C]ertain gay subcultural reviews suggested that ‘Hollywood’ had rendered the film palatable by making the drag queens eschew sexual contact (e.g., Shulman)” (45). Even with its subcultural status relative to *To Wong Foo*, *Priscilla* also provides a portrait of homosexuality with questionable similarity to real gay identity:

Priscilla is a curious example of a film which is both very “gay” and very straight. Raucous drag queens, fierce frocks, blue language, and a hilarious collision of Sydney Culture with Outback Nature—but no homosexuality, thank you very much. Only Terence Stamp’s sour and feisty transsexual Bernadette (i.e. a “woman”) is allowed a hint of a sex life ... The nearest *Priscilla* comes to same-sex contact is when Felicia ... is nearly raped by a queerbasher ... [Likewise, Pearce’s] hammy queening ... serves to remind that he is dissimulating—it’s really nice Guy Pearce—the straight surfer dude out of *Neighbours*. (Simpson 152–53)

This description calls to mind both Calhoun's gay displacement *and* camp sensibility: to gain access to the public sphere, gays and lesbians are forced to adopt an apparent heterosexuality, using the techniques that Yoshino terms converting, covering, and/or passing to achieve this public persona; such adoption necessarily eliminates the possibility for open expression of an explicitly gay sexuality. Cook provides a reading of Simpson's "hilarious collision" that she argues has been largely overlooked by critics, citing the (camp) humor created by the irony of its "incongruous situations," such as

the presence of elaborately dressed drag queens from Sydney in quiet, traditional bush towns and Aboriginal people disco dancing with the queens in the middle of the Outback. This incongruity generates laughs whilst providing a basis for exchanges between characters who represent marginalised social groups. (14)

The same images that some read as homophobic and racist provide the basis for Cook's claim of the film's campness: at the same time that the queens feel hostility toward the heteronormative system that places them at its margins, which they express through their over-the-top comportment, they occasionally encounter hostility from members of other groups that are also marginalized (Shirl, Bob's wife Cynthia). As Brooks puts it, the film's performances "have clear camp overtones allowing for simultaneous parody of the structures that exclude transgendered figures while acknowledging their power" (3).

On other occasions, however, the queens find acceptance and assistance where they least expect it, from the very traditionally heterosexual Australian "mate" Bob, who makes the first repairs to the bus and then accompanies the queens on the rest of their journey to Alice Springs, even forming a romantic relationship with Bernadette, and from the group of aboriginal people who rescue them from another mechanical transportation

failure and eventually join the queens in their lip-synched performance of Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive," producing a mash-up of pop and tribal music, stage make-up and costumes and indigenous cultural rituals that it seems difficult to label as anything *other* than queer. As Cook states, "the blending of traditional dance and the didgeridoo with the modern disco sound implies a mutuality between Aboriginal and drag cultures that appreciates both in equal measure" (10). An audience's reception of this performance relies on its ability to focus on the scene's thematic elements rather than its (surface) visual ones: ultimately, it promotes the idea of cross-cultural cooperation and acceptance using the camp aesthetic of ironic or unexpected juxtaposition.

Overall, even critics who acknowledge the troubling nature of *Priscilla's* at least occasional privileging of heterosexist norms tend to agree that camp ultimately functions within the film to disrupt those norms and/or account for the possibility of sexual and gender fluidity. According to Cook, "Sexuality and gender are ... framed as modes of performance in a challenge to mainstream assumptions about identity and normality" (15), and Jennings and Lomine observe that

the creation of the three main protagonists who so clearly disrupt hegemonic notions of a stable trinity between sex, gender and sexuality invited audiences to question their own perceptions of Australian identities and lifestyles. Pre-conceived notions of the relationship of the mainstream to the margins become destabilised by putting these three characters at the centre of the narrative. (146)

Champagne asserts that the very subject matter of the film is campy in its emphasis on style, surface appearance, and irony, and Tincknell and Chambers agree that "this campness ... also makes it 'queer,' for it is through a camp discourse that the possibility

of sexual and gender fluidity is popularly mediated” (151). Regardless of the nature of a viewer’s final interpretation of Elliott’s film, it seems difficult to completely overlook the many examples it contains of overt camp that seem more concerned with questioning mainstream cultural values than upholding them.

4.4. Conclusion

Upon its release in American theaters, *To Wong Foo* met with somewhat lukewarm reception; audiences widely dismissed it as simply “the American *Priscilla*” (see Woodruff; Floyd; Murray 77) or worse, a “rip-off of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*” (Floyd). As Evans points out,

Indeed, a very particular myth formed early on—that *To Wong Foo* was, specifically, a remake of *Priscilla* (e.g., Woodruff) ... Despite common perceptions, [it was not]. The two were in almost parallel production, ... a factor of some concern to the makers of *Priscilla* ... (Clark 88). The coincidence of the two appears to have been an accident of fate/market—due, no doubt, to the ... omnipresent mania about drag in the early 1990s. (42-43)

Both films have been accused of featuring toned-down or softened versions of queer gender or sexual identity, mostly out of a desire to increase their chances of commercial success within a mainstream market. Unfortunately, this very strategy may have ensured at least the partial alienation of queer viewers, whose identities they purported to portray:

To Wong Foo’s publicity was widely directed at mainstream audiences ... alongside more subculturally oriented marketing in gay sources. [These] volleys toward the queer subcultural audience might have been significantly damaged, however, by the thrust of their mainstream parallels. Indeed, aspects of *To Wong Foo*’s publicity campaign did little to endear themselves to the gay market. (Evans 44)

Still, both films fit within the larger trend toward progressive images of identity in 1990s cinema, rendering visible that which was previously closeted.

Champagne even argues for *Priscilla*'s potential to create a *positive* response in gay male viewers in particular as a result of its emphasis on musical and dance performance:

[T]he nightly ritual of attending the disco was central to post-Stonewall pre-AIDS gay white male urban culture ... *Priscilla* ... focus[es] on the rehearsal process itself, and [is] reminiscent of the hours we spent practicing the latest dance moves in our basements in preparation for that evening's dance contest. (72)

He also suggests the pleasurable associations gay men might experience between both films and the classic musical genre with its embedded "utopian fantasies," the

"energy" of the musical contrasting with the paucity of affect one must assume to pass as "straight" and "masculine," a sense of "community" contrasting with the isolation felt by many gay men in their daily lives, the "intensity" and "transparency" of performance style contrasting with the duplicity of life in the closet, and so forth ... [M]usicals seem to have provided some gay men with a device for fabricating a rich and sustaining utopian mythology in response to their shared sense of oppression. (73)

A number of the critics quoted in this chapter highlight both films' emphasis on the acceptance of diversity, some even characterizing it as their central message. In any case, we must certainly acknowledge that *something* significant has indeed shifted in contemporary American culture, which has allowed gender-transgressing figures to escape out of the closet and the annals of psychiatric literature and onto the big (and small) screen as worthy subjects for mass cultural consumption.

CONCLUSION

When I began this project, I had in mind the lofty goal of creating a complete history of transgender representation in late-20th-century American film, grouping the films into the very simple categories of “good” and “bad” representation. As I actually started analyzing and comparing the films, however, it quickly became evident that this framework would fail to contain the theoretical moves I wanted to make, first because the list of transgender-themed films was long enough to preclude an in-depth reading of each individual movie, and second because my initial “good” and “bad” categories were far too simplistic to account for the degree of nuance that exists in cinematic portrayals of gender transgression. As I have endeavored to point out in my readings, *no* film is entirely good or entirely bad; films that seem on the surface to be highly transgressive actually uphold some of society’s most conservative mainstream values, and others that appear to be mere reproductions of the most clichéd gender/racial/sexual stereotypes contain some of the queerest moments. To complete this dissertation, I will review the major questions I have attempted to address as well as suggesting directions for further research and scholarship, which I hope will continue to examine the relationship between representation and ideology and the cultural work that is possible for film to do, conveying knowledge as well as new paradigms for looking at the world in terms of gender.

I began by suggesting that many films have associated transgender identity with various forms of monstrosity and/or deviancy, alternately depicting transgendered people

as murdering sociopaths, aliens, pathetic victims, or farcical caricatures. Such portrayals tended to focus on the marking of difference between transgendered and cisgendered people, participating in what Cheshire Calhoun terms displacement, effectively erasing transgendered identity from the public sphere and relegating it to marginal status when acknowledging it at all. I provided a brief summary of recent scholarship that has suggested complete abolition of the binary gender system with its acknowledged inability to account for the actual diversity that exists in real gender identities, suggesting that a collective societal progression toward this end would help facilitate the elimination of transphobic “words and deeds” from contemporary American culture.

In my analyses of four selected films featuring transgender or gender-transgressive identities, I wanted to answer two questions: first, what qualities contribute to a progressive portrayal of transgender identity, and second, what response(s) do such portrayals have the potential to create in their audiences? The films I chose to analyze depict very different versions of gender transgression, transsexuality on what we might term one “extreme end” of the spectrum of mind-body symmetry with respect to gender, and drag queen performance on the other, which relies for its intelligibility on the viewer’s knowledge that the performance is “just for show” and generally assumed not to indicate an individual’s desire to undergo physiological transformation.

In *Transamerica* and *Normal*, both of which feature transsexual protagonists, I suggested that positive portrayal depends largely upon a film’s depiction of behavior that overtly transgresses heterosexist norms and binary gender roles, the degree to which it

shows the protagonist's acceptance within a stable family or community and avoids exploiting transgender identity for merely comic purposes, and the effects that the gender transition process has on the people around the protagonist. *Transamerica* broke new ground by featuring a transsexual protagonist in a fairly mainstream film and casting a well-known actress to play the role, thus potentially achieving the educational or knowledge-dissemination function I mentioned above. However, because of its exploitative tendency to trivialize the difficulties of transgender identity for comedic purposes and its rigid adherence to the binary gender system, the film ultimately falls short of being an overall progressive and positive portrayal of transgender identity.

Normal, on the other hand, does show the protagonist performing overtly transgressive gender behaviors, and much of the narrative focuses on how Roy's transition into Ruth affects not only herself, but her family and community. Placing the film within the cultural milieu of rural white America creates a sense of the uncanny in the viewer by juxtaposing all of the familiar trappings of Midwestern conservatism with the very unfamiliar depiction of a middle-aged man who suddenly reveals that he has spent his entire life up to this point "in the wrong body." The film shows both Roy's family and community's initial resistance to his revelation and their eventual acceptance of it, which is at first grudging and reluctant, and then, eventually, driven by genuine love and compassion. While Bree undergoes almost her entire transition before the film even begins, the viewer follows Roy through the entire process, thus receiving a more complete picture of what it "looks like" to come out as a transsexual in the midst of small-town conservative values.

In a seemingly very different manifestation of gender-transgressive identity, *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* each feature three male drag queen protagonists and chronicle the trio's road trip that ends with both a final and long-awaited stage performance and the resolution of the characters' various psychological journeys. *Priscilla* was released first, leading some critics to assume that *To Wong Foo* was merely an Americanized remake of the Australian film that achieved cult status both at home and abroad; however, this claim was eventually proven false and the films' similarity attributed to coincidence. I chose to contrast the portrayals of transsexuals and drag queens because of the significant features of gender's constructed nature that is revealed in both films: with her excess of pink accessories, Bree's performance of femininity reads as no less constructed than both trios of queens' donning of extraordinarily flamboyant clothing and make-up, and both "performances" are met with varying degrees of hostility by ignorant individuals and groups.

To Wong Foo employs a great number of the stereotypical features attributed to gay men and drag queens; Vida, Noxema, and Chi Chi are all flamboyant in their femininity, and their behavior and conduct is ultimately monitored and regulated by the white, heteronormative force represented by Vida, the group's generally unquestioned leader. As I pointed out in Chapter 4, the film also makes use of a number of troubling racial stereotypes that make even its attempt to advocate tolerance and acceptance ultimately ineffective; the queens' separation from each other as well as from the townspeople with whom they interact is continually framed in racial terms. The film's

conclusion ultimately upholds both heteronormativity and whiteness, both decidedly *un-queer* constructions.

Priscilla, on the other hand, portrays gay identity and drag performance in slightly more nuanced terms, showing the queens out of costume as much or more as it shows them *in* it, reinforcing the idea that drag is in one sense contained within the temporal (and geographic) space of the stage show (when not onstage and in costume, Mitzi and Felicia appear at least visually to be “just” Tick and Adam). Bernadette queers this boundary, however, by being a transsexual who performs as a drag queen, once again collapsing the boundary between performance and identity and providing a much more complex examination of gender than that provided by *To Wong Foo*.

The question of “where to go from here” is always an important one, especially in a project that has attempted to trace the evolution of a given cultural phenomenon. This dissertation has taken some of the early steps toward achieving Dvorsky and Hughes’s postgenderist society, pointing out the moments in even seemingly mainstream films that perform active interrogation or disruption of heterosexist ideologies. Film portrayals alone cannot change the world; the path toward real change lies in what audiences do after they leave the movie theater, whether they allow film to alter their existing perception of the world and how gender functions within it or cling even more fervently to their existing narrow beliefs about gender and sexuality, ignoring the lessons that film has to teach. Filmmakers have the ability, by nature of their craft, to engage with the world around them, and present their audiences with problematized and complex

negotiations between frequently conflicting belief structures. As long as filmmakers continue to expand their representations of gender and actively question existing hierarchical structures, viewers must continue to absorb, process, and ideally, share the ideologies in films that suggest a permanent abandonment of the two-gender system and adoption of a much broader concept of what it means in modern society to be a gendered human being.

WORKS CITED

- Aaron, Michele, ed. *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.
- Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, The*. Dir. Stephan Elliott. Perf. Guy Pearce, Terence Stamp, Hugo Weaving. 1994. DVD. MGM, 2007.
- American Psychological Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. 3rd ed. (DSM-III). Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1980.
- . *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. 3rd rev. ed. (DSM-III-R). Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1987.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987.
- . "To(o) Queer the Writer: Loca, Escrita, y Chicana." *InVersions: Writings by Dykes, Queers, and Lesbians*. Ed. Betsy Warland. Vancouver: Press Gang, 1991. 249-263.
- Babuscio, Jack. "Camp and the Gay Sensibility," *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*. Ed. Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin. New York: Routledge, 2004. 121-136.
- Barnard, Ian. "Queer Race." *Social Semiotics* 9:2 (1999): 199-212.
- Bogoras, Waldemar. *The Chukchee: Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History*. Vol. 11, pt. 2. New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1907.
- Bornstein, Kate. *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.
- Bouldrey, Brian. *Wrestling with the Angel: Faith and Religion in the Lives of Gay Men*. New York: Riverhead, 1995.
- Boys Don't Cry*. Dir. Kimberly Peirce. Perf. Hilary Swank, Chloë Sevigny, Peter Sarsgaard, Brendan Sexton III. 1999. DVD. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2000.
- Breen, Marcus. "The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert." *Australian Film 1978-1994: A Survey of Theatrical Features*. Ed. Scott Murray. Oxford University Press: Melbourne, 1995. 376.
- Brooks, Karen. "Homosexuality, Homosociality, and Gender Blending in Australian Film." *Special Issue on Australian Film*, spec. iss. of *Antipodes* 13:2 (1999): 85-90 (1-6).

- Busch, Charles. "Risky Business." *The Advocate* 5 September 1995: 52.
- Bullough, Vern L. and Bonnie. *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex.'* New York: Routledge, 1993.
- . "Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality." *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 2006. 183-193.
- . *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge, 1999; first published 1990.
- . "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin. New York and London: Routledge, 1993. 307-320.
- Caster, Peter and Allison Andrew. "Transgender Nation: Crossing Borders and Queering Space in *Transamerica*." *English Language Notes* 45:2 (2007): 133-139.
- Champagne, John. "Dancing Queen? Feminist and Gay Male Spectatorship in Three Recent Films from Australia." *Film Criticism* 21:3 (1997): 66-88.
- Citron, Michelle, Julia Lesage, Judith Mayne, B. Ruby Rich, the editors of *New German Critique*. "Women and Film: A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics." From *New German Critique*, 13, New York: Telos Press, 1978. Re-printed in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Sue Thornham. New York: New York University Press, 1999.
- Cohen, Cathy J. "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3 (1997): 437-465.
- Coleman, Eli. "Toward Version 7 of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health's Standards of Care." *Toward Version 7 of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health's Standards of Care*, spec. iss. of *International Journal of Transgenderism* 11:1 (2009): 1-7.
- Cook, Ann-Marie. "More Than Just a Laugh: Assessing the Politics of Camp in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*." *Representation and Contestation: Cultural Politics in a Political Century*. Ed. Ching-Yu Lin, John McSweeney, and Paul Reynolds. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2010. 3-26 (1-22).
- Cromwell, Jason. "Passing Women and Female-Bodied Men: (Re)claiming FTM History." *Reclaiming Genders: Transsexual Grammars at the Fin de Siècle*. Ed. Kate More and Stephen Whittle. London and New York: Cassell, 1999. 34-61.

- . "Queering the Binaries: Transsituated Identities, Bodies, and Sexualities." *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 2006. 509-520.
- Daly, Steve. "It's Not Easy Being A Queen." *Entertainment Weekly* 22 September 1995: 35.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Afterword: Toward An Ethic of Discussion." *Limited Inc*. Trans. Samuel Weber. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988.
- Doty, Alexander. "General Introduction." *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*. Ed. Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin. New York: Routledge, 2004. 1-16.
- . *Makings Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Duggan, Lisa. *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack On Democracy*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004.
- Dvorsky, George and James Hughes, Ph.D. "Postgenderism: Beyond the Gender Binary." IEET White Paper 003. *Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies*. 20 March 2008. 19 February 2012 <<http://ieet.org/index.php/IEET/more/dvorsky20080320>>.
- Dyer, Richard. "It's Being So Camp As Keeps Us Going." *The Culture of Queers*. London: Routledge, 2002. 49-62.
- Epstein, B.J. "Dreaming of Dresses: Transgender Books for Children." *HuffPost Books*. 15 February 2012. 24 February 2012 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bj-epstein/transgender-books-for-children_b_1278473.html>.
- Evans, Alex. "How Homo Can Hollywood Be? Remaking Queer Authenticity from *To Wong Foo* to *Brokeback Mountain*." *Journal of Film and Video* 61:4 (2009): 41-54.
- Farrell, Kelly. "(Foot)Ball Gowns: Masculinities, Sexualities and the Politics of Performance." *Journal of Australian Studies* 63 (1999): 157-164.
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne. *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.
- Feinberg, Leslie. *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998.
- . "Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come." New York: World View Forum, 1992. Reprinted in *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Ed. Susan Stryker & Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 2006. 205-220.

- . *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.
- Felluga, Dino. "Modules on Kristeva: On the Abject." *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*. 31 January 2011. Purdue University. 7 March 2012
<<http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/kristeva/abject.html>>.
- Floyd, Nigel. Rev. of *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*. Dir. Beeban Kidron. 1995. *Time Out Film Guide*. London: Time Out, 2002. 819.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The 'Uncanny.'" *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*. Trans. James Strachey, et al. London: Hogarth Press - Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955. 217-256.
- Frye, Marilyn. "The Necessity of Differences: Constructing A Positive Category of Woman." *Signs* 21.4 (1996): 991-1010.
- . "Sexism." In *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1983. 17-40, 17, 23.
- Gallop, Jane. *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982.
- Garber, Marjorie. *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Gatens, Moira. "A Critique of the Sex-Gender Distinction." *Imaginary Bodies*. New York: Routledge, 1996. 3-20.
- Goldman, Ruth. "Who Is That Queer Queer? Exploring Norms around Sexuality, Race, and Class in Queer Theory." *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Anthology*. Ed. Brett Beemyn and Michelle Eliason. New York: New York University Press, 1996. 169-182.
- Grahn, Judy. *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.
- Green, Jamison. "Look! No, Don't! The Visibility Dilemma for Transsexual Men." *Reclaiming Genders: Transsexual Grammars at the Fin de Siècle*. Ed. Kate More and Stephen Whittle. London and New York: Cassell, 1999. 117-131.
- . "Transmen: Behind Assimilation, Problems Exist." *21st Century Sexualities: Contemporary Issues in Health, Education, and Rights*. Ed. Gilbert Herdt and Cymene Howe. New York: Routledge, 2007. 35-37.

- Halberstam, Judith. *Female Masculinity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998.
- . *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgendered Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2005.
- Hammond, Joyce. "Drag Queen as Angel: Transformation and Transcendence in *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 24:3 (1996): 106-114.
- Harris, Hilary. "Desert Training for Whites: Australian Road Movies." *Journal of Australian Studies*. 86 (2006): 99(15).
- Harvey, Dennis. "A New Queer Century: Finding Reasons to Believe in the Newer Queer Cinema of the '00s." *sfbg.com*. 2004. 3 March 2012 <http://www.sfbg.com/38/38/art_film_queer.html>.
- Hernandez, Michael. "I Am Neither Man Nor Woman." In Leslie Feinberg, *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998. 74-76.
- Hirschfeld, Magnus. "[s]elections [f]rom *The Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross-Dress*" (1910). *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Ed. Susan Stryker & Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 2006. 28-39.
- Hollibaugh, Amber L. "My Dangerous Desires: Falling in Love with Stone Butches; Passing Women and Girls (Who Are Guys) Who Catch My Eye." *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000. Reprinted in *Queer Cultures*. Ed. Deborah Carlin and Jennifer DiGrazia. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004. 371-385.
- Jennings, Ros and Loyke Lominé. "Nationality and New Queer Cinema: Australian Film." *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Michelle Aaron. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004. 144-154.
- Jicha, Tom. "HBO Movie On Gender-bending Anything But Normal." *sun-sentinel.com*. 15 March 2003. 4 March 2012 <http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/2003-03-15/lifestyle/0303140498_1_irma-gender-roy-applewood>.
- Juett, JoAnne C. "'Just Travelin' Thru': Transgendered Spaces in *Transamerica*." *Coming Out to the Mainstream: New Queer Cinema in the 21st Century*. Ed. JoAnne C. Juett and David M. Jones. Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars, 2010. 60-90.
- Kane, Kathryn. "Neoliberal Investments in Queerface and Whiteface: A Critical Analysis of *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*." *Coming Out to the Mainstream: New Queer Cinema in the 21st Century*. Ed. JoAnne C. Juett and David M. Jones. Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars, 2010.

- Kirk, Mary. "Kind of a Drag: Gender, Race, and Ambivalence in *The Birdcage* and *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*." *Journal of Homosexuality* 46:3-4 (2004): 169-180.
- Kittay, Eva Feder. "Vulnerability and the Moral Nature of Dependency Relations." *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology*. Ed. Ann E. Cudd and Robin O. Andreasen. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. 264-279.
- Laframboise, Sandra RPN. "An Introduction to Gender, Transgender and Transphobia." 29 January 2002. High Risk Project Society. 27 February 2012 <<http://mypage.direct.ca/h/hrp/gendertr.html>>.
- Lang, Robert. "My Own Private Idaho and the New Queer Road Movies." *The Road Movie Book*. Ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark. New York: Routledge, 1997. 330-348.
- Lipsitz, George. *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- MacKenzie, Gordene Olga. *Transgender Nation*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994.
- Marloff, Sarah. "The Absence of Trans Men in Pornography." *examiner.com*. 31 May 2009. 27 February 2012 <<http://www.examiner.com/transgendered-relationships-in-san-francisco/the-absence-of-trans-men-pornography>>.
- McNeill, John J. *Taking a Chance on God: Liberating Theology for Gays, Lesbians, and Their Lovers, Families, and Friends*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1988.
- Meyer, Walter III M.D. et al, eds. "The Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association's Standards of Care for Gender Identity Disorders, Sixth Version." World Professional Association for Transgender Health: February 2001.
- Meyerowitz, Joanne. *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Miles, Kevin Thomas. "Body Badges: Race and Sex." *Race/Sex: Their Sameness, Difference, and Interplay*. Ed. Naomi Zack. New York: Routledge, 1997. 133-143.
- Moraga, Cherrie. *Loving in the War Years*. Boston: South End Press, 1983.
- . "Queer Aztlan: The Re-formation of Chicano Tribe." *The Material Queer: A LesBiGay Cultural Studies Reader*. Ed. Donald Morton. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996. 297-304.

- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16:3 (1975): 6-18. Reprinted in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Sue Thornham. New York: New York University Press, 1999. 58-69.
- . "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946))." *Framework* 15-16-17 (Summer 1981): 12-15. Reprinted in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Sue Thornham. New York: New York University Press, 1999. 122-130.
- Murray, Raymond. *Images in the Dark: Encyclopedia of Gay and Lesbian Film and Video*. 2nd rev. ed. London: Titan Books, 1998.
- Namaste, Ki. "Tragic Misreadings: Queer Theory's Erasure of Transgender Subjectivity." *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Anthology*. Ed. Brett Beemyn and Michelle Eliason. New York: New York University Press, 1996. 183-203.
- Namaste, Vivian. *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Nanda, Serena. *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1990.
- Newton, Esther. *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.
- . "[s]election [f]rom *Mother Camp*." *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Ed. Susan Stryker & Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 2006. 121-130.
- Newton, Robert. "Interview: Duncan Tucker, Writer/Director of *Transamerica*." *cinematical.com*. 14 December 2005. 5 March 2012 <<http://www.cinematical.com/2005112114/interview-duncan-tucker-writer-director-of-transamerica>>.
- Normal*. Dir. Jane Anderson. Perf. Tom Wilkinson, Jessica Lange, Hayden Panettiere. 2003. DVD. HBO Home Entertainment, 2003.
- Ng, Vivien. "Race Matters." *Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Critical Introduction*. Ed. Andy Medhurst and Sally Munt. London: Cassell, 1997. 215-231.
- Okin, Susan Moller. *Justice, Gender, and the Family*. New York: Basic Books, 1989.
- O'Neill, Craig, and Kathleen Ritter. *Coming Out Within: Stages of Spiritual Awakening for Lesbians and Gay Men*. San Francisco: Harpers, 1992.
- O'Regan, Tom. *Australian National Cinema*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

- Ortiz, Daniel R. "Creating Controversy: Essentialism and Constructivism and the Politics of Gay Identity." *Virginia Law Review* 79:7 (1993): Symposium on Sexual Orientation and the Law. 1833-1857.
- Paglia, Camille. *Vamps and Tramps: New Essays*. New York: Vintage Press, 1994.
- Phillips, John. *Transgender on Screen*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- ProCon.org. "Major Theorists on the Origin of Sexual Orientation." *BornGay.ProCon.org*. ProCon.org. 13 April 2009. 10 March 2012 <http://borngay.procon.org/view.resource.php?resourceID=000019>.
- Prosser, Jay. "Judith Butler: Queer Feminism, Transgender, and the Transubstantiation of Sex." *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Ed. Susan Stryker & Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 2006. 257-280.
- Puar, Jasbir. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Next Wave: New Directions in Women's Studies). Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Rich, B. Ruby. "New Queer Cinema." *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Michelle Aaron. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004. 15-22.
- . "Vision Quest: Searching for the Diamonds in the Rough." *villagevoice.com*. 19 March 2002. 3 March 2012 <<http://www.villagevoice.com/2002-03-19/news/vision-quest/>>.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *La Métaphore Vive*. Trans. John Phillips. Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1975.
- Roberts, Jamie. "Interview with Duncan Tucker (Director of *TransAmerica*)."
Transgender Tapestry 110 (2006): 34-36.
- Roscoe, Will, ed. *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology*. New York: St. Martin's, 1988.
- . *Queer Spirits: A Gay Men's Myth Book*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.
- . *The Zuni Man-Woman*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991.
- Rubin, Gayle. "Of Catamites and Kings: Reflections on Butch, Gender, and Boundaries." *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 2006. 471-481.
- . "Thinking Sex: Notes for A Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality." *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. Ed. Carole S. Vance. London: Pandora, 1992. 267-319.

- . "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. Ed. Rayna R. Reiter. New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1975. 157-210.
- Rustin, Emily. "Romance and Sensation in the 'Glitter' Cycle." *Australian Cinema in the 1990s*. Ed. Ian Craven. London: Routledge, 2000. 133-148.
- Ryan, Joelle Ruby. *Reel Gender: Examining the Politics of Trans Images in Film and Media*. Dissertation, Bowling Green State University. Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, 2009. (Publication No. AAT 3371008.)
- Salomon, Gayle. *Assuming A Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Sauter, Michael. "Dragsters." *Entertainment Weekly* 11 August 1995: 38.
- Schacht, Steven P. "Four Renditions of Female Drag: Feminine Appearing Variations of a Masculine Theme." *Gendered Sexualities* 6 (2002): 157-180.
- Scherr, Rebecca. "(Not) Queering White Vision in *Far From Heaven* and *Transamerica*." *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 50 (2008): n. pag. Web. 5 March 2012.
- Schilt, Kristen and Laurel Westbrook. "Doing Gender, Doing Heteronormativity: 'Gender Normals,' Transgender People, and the Social Maintenance of Heterosexuality." *Gender & Society* 23:4 (2009): 440-464.
- Showalter, Elaine. *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin-de-Siècle*. New York: Viking, 1990.
- Shulman, Randy. "Fairy Tale" (Rev. of *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*). Dir. Beeban Kidron. *Metro Arts & Entertainment Weekly* 31 Aug. 1995. Reprinted in *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (Fansite). Web. 15 July 2005. <<http://www.transgender-net.de/Film/film1/towong.html>>.
- Simpson, Mark. *It's A Queer World: Deviant Adventures in Pop Culture*. London: Vintage, 1996.
- Smyth, Cherry. *Lesbians Talk Queer Notions*. London: Scarlet Press, 1992.
- Stone, Sandy. "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto." *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Ed. Susan Stryker & Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 2006. 221-235.
- Straayer, Chris. *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-orientations in Film and Video*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

- Stryker, Susan. "(De)subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies." *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Ed. Susan Stryker & Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 2006a. 1-17.
- . "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix." *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Ed. Susan Stryker & Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 2006b. 244-256.
- . *Transgender History*. Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008.
- Sullivan, Lou. "A Transvestite Answers A Feminist." *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 2006. 159-164.
- Sullivan, Nikki. *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. New York: New York University Press, 2003.
- Swenson, Erin K. "Things Not *Normal* in Small Town Illinois: A Review of the HBO Film, *Normal*." *erinswen.com*. 17 July 2003. 4 March 2012 <<http://www.erinswen.com/NormalReview.pdf>>.
- Thornham, Sue, ed. *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.
- Tincknell, Estella and Deborah Chambers. "Performing the Crisis: Fathering, Gender, and Representation in Two 1990s Films." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 29:4 (2002): 146-155.
- To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*. Dir. Beeban Kidron. Perf. Patrick Swayze, Wesley Snipes, John Leguizamo, Stockard Channing. 1995. DVD. MCA Home Video, 2003.
- TransAmerica*. Dir. Duncan Tucker. Perf. Felicity Huffman, Andrea James, Elizabeth Peña, Danny Burstein. 2005. Weinstein Company, 2006.
- Turner, Victor. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974.
- Valentine, David. *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of A Category*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Venkatasawmy, Rama, Catherine Simpson, and Tanja Visosevic. "From Sand to Bitumen, From Bushrangers to 'Bogans': Mapping the Australian Road Movie." *Journal of Australian Studies* 25:70 (2001): 73-84.
- Violante, Anthony. "The Changing Face of Black Comedy." *The Buffalo News* 17 November 2000: 23G.

- Warner, Michael. *Fear of A Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Whitley, CT. "Trans-Corporation: A Benefit Analysis of a Transgender Man in a Corporate Setting." *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation*. Ed. Kate Bornstein and S. Bear Bergman. Berkeley: Seal Press, 2010. 31-37.
- Whittle, Stephen. *The Transgender Debate: The Crisis Surrounding Gender Identity*. Reading, UK: South Street Press, 2000.
- Wilchins, Riki. *Queer Theory, Gender Theory: An Instant Primer*. Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 2004.
- Williams, Walter L. *The Spirit and the Flesh*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986.
- Wittig, Monique. *The Straight Mind*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.
- Woodruff, Zachary. "A Turkey in Chick's Clothing" (Rev. of *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*). Dir. Beeban Kidron. *Tucson Weekly* 14 Sept. 1995. Reprinted in *Tucson Weekly Online* 5 April 2006. <<http://www.tucsonweekly.com/tw/09-14-95/cinema.htm>>.
- Yoshino, Kenji. "Covering." *The Yale Law Journal* 111:4 (2002): 769-939.
- Zucker, Kenneth J. & Anne A. Lawrence. "Epidemiology of Gender Identity Disorder: Recommendations for the Standards of Care of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health." *Toward Version 7 of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health's Standards of Care*, spec. iss. of *International Journal of Transgenderism* 11:1 (2009): 8-18.