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An Act of Violence: Transfemininity and the Media

When I began my research on transgender representation in the media, I took to the shelves of the Sarah Lawrence College library. There I found that the section of the library focused on gender studies was squeezed between literature on lesbian/gay studies and fetishes/kinks, the latter then leading into the topic of sex work. Though I found this arrangement frustrating, in that it was somewhat dehumanizing, I was not at all surprised by it. It is my opinion that the placement of these subjects was no accident as it very accurately parallels the stream of thought the general uninformed public tends to have when thinking about trans people, especially trans women: when first introduced to the disruption of heteronormativity, one tends to exoticize queerness, lumping both gender non-conformity and sex into the same concept of perversion. From here, the American Capitalist will often ask the question, “how does this phenomenon apply to me and how can I capitalize on it?” thus linking these concepts to prostitution. We exist in a culture that emphasizes the individual, and for that reason, we are raised with a subconscious sense that the world revolves around the single self. The American Capitalist feels entitled to understand, be involved with, and benefit from everything around them, and because the transgender identity/image differs from the conventional, it becomes a spectacle instead of a privately lived experience.

Within the last decade, the visibility of transgender people has increased exponentially. However, despite their recent prevalence in the media, the community

itself is estimated to make up only 0.3% of the U.S. population.¹ This means that the average American's understanding of transgender people is far more likely to come from what is seen on TV than from trans-identified people they know personally, putting a large responsibility on the media to educate the public about this otherwise invisible minority. Unfortunately, as is the case for most minority groups, the media's portrayal of trans women is highly problematic. This paper seeks to explore exactly what those problematic aspects are and how it affects not only the opinion of the general public, but also the effect it has on the lived experience of trans women themselves.

Terminology

Over the last few decades, as the politics of transgenderism has evolved rapidly, so too has the vernacular. Even now, within the transgender community, there is an ongoing discourse over what languages is the most sensible or politically correct to use for ourselves. The terminology I use in this paper does not reflect the opinion of all trans-identified folks, but it is the terminology I am most familiar with.

The word "transgender" (or trans) acts as an umbrella term for all gender identities that do not coincide with the gender one was assigned at birth. This includes both genders that fit within the male-female binary and genders that do not. "Transsexual", an identity that falls under the transgender umbrella, implies a surgical and/or hormonal change to the body that one makes in order to better fit their ideal gender presentation. There is a lot of stigma surrounding this term, and while some trans individuals who have physically transitioned, such as Julia Serano, activist and author of Whipping Girl, use "transsexual" comfortably and frequently in reference to themselves,²

others, such as Janet Mock, activist and author of Redefining Realness, find the term to be dehumanizing. In an interview, Mock was quoted stating “I think that ‘transsexual’ almost, to me, makes it only about the body and the transition, whereas ‘transgender,’ I feel, speaks more to the entire essence of, politically, what our bodies say.”³ For this reason, I will be using the term transsexual only when the biology of an individual is an integral part of my argument. As I will later prove, the focus on the body when it is unnecessary is a key issue in the mainstream discussion of transgender people.

“Transfemininity” is the expression of femininity within people assigned male at birth. Intersecting both misogyny and transphobia, “Transmisogyny,” describes a unique form of prejudice against transfemininity in a patriarchal culture. If one identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth, that person is “cisgender” (cis).

Method

Prior to my research, I assumed that I would find the representation of the trans women today to be fetishizing and/or sensationalizing. This assumption came primarily from my own experience, growing up in America and watching television, but my awareness of this issue was heightened when I came across Julia Serano’s Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity. This book, maybe even better described as a manifesto, has served as the basis of all my research for this piece. Although Serano explores the impact that misogyny has on any and all aspects of gender, her second chapter focuses specifically on the media depiction of trans women. Here, she introduces her theory of a dichotomy, the only two ways she believes

transsexual women are doomed to be viewed: “the deceptive transsexual” and “the pathetic transsexual.”²

My initial research focused less on television and more on movie portrayals, as I believe films have a longer-lasting cultural impact. I chose to view and analyze two films, comparing my analysis with Julia Serano’s, in order to have a more well rounded argument. I looked at *The Crying Game*, a narrative Serano characterizes as the “deceptive transsexual”, and *Transamerica*, which portrays more of a “pathetic transsexual.” I chose these films in part because of their appearance in Whipping Girl, and in part because when I searched “transgender film”, they were first two films about transgender women that Google recommended, signifying that they have a cultural importance.

While Whipping Girl itself is thorough and informative, it was written nearly a decade ago from the perspective from one woman. For this reason, I decided to both corroborate and contrast Serano’s perspective with other trans women, prominent activists and public figures who have spoken on these issues to give more varied and recent opinions. I looked at interviews with women such as Laverne Cox, Janet Mock and Carmen Carrera, all trans women of color in the media spotlight who have recently been revolutionizing the way we talk about trans people.

It is worth noting that I myself identify as transgender, but being white and DFAB (designated female at birth), there are experiences I will be speaking on that I myself have never lived. However, although I am transmasculine, I chose to focus primarily on the transfeminine image in television and film for two reasons. First, the image of transgender women is significantly more prominent than that of transgender men. There

is almost no representation of trans men in the media, as they do not challenge the patriarchal norm nearly as much as trans women do and therefore are not shocking. Second, and related, the shock value and transmisogyny that comes along with the general fascination with transfemininity fetishizes and dehumanizes these women, resulting in violence against them. The issue of ignorant portrayals of trans women goes beyond being annoying and offensive; it is genuinely dangerous. This paper will prove that the portrayal of transgender women in the media has a direct effect on transgender women in real life. By shaping how the general public views these women, the media has the power to influence how they are treated.

The Deceptive Transsexual: The Crying Game

Media depictions of trans women, whether they take the form of fictional characters or actual people, usually fall under one of two main archetypes: the “deceptive transsexual” or the “pathetic transsexual”. While characters based on both models are presented as having a vested interest in achieving an ultrafeminine appearance, they differ in their abilities to pull it off. Because the “deceivers” successfully pass as women, they generally act as unexpected plot twists, or play the role of sexual predators who fool innocent straight guys into falling for other “men.”

- Julia Serano²

Despite what it is most famous for, *The Crying Game* is not a film about a transgender woman. The protagonist, Fergus, is a cisgender, heterosexual white man and a member of the Irish terrorist group IRA. The first third of the film follows Fergus as he and his team capture a black British soldier, Jody, and hold him hostage. Fergus is tasked with keeping an eye on Jody, but over time, a bond begins to form between the two of them. Jody knows he will probably die a war prisoner, and after a few days in captivity, he hands Fergus a picture of Dil, his girlfriend, and asks him to “find her out. Tell her I

was thinking of her.” Once Jody is shot, Fergus abandons his team and runs off in search of Dil.

Dil herself is not introduced until about 40 minutes in the film. Fergus, who has arrived in England undercover, telling people that he is Scottish and that his name is Jimmy, finds her at the beauty shop she works at right before it closes. Jimmy/Fergus does not know that Dil is trans, and unless the audience can tell that a male actor is playing the character, they do not know either. In this scene, it becomes obvious that Fergus is attracted to Dil, and a quasi-romantic relationship is formed between the two.

If they could not tell beforehand, the audience finds out that Dil is trans at the same time Fergus does, over an hour into the film. It is the first night the two decide to have sex, and they are in Dil’s apartment, where her walls, her bed, her curtains, are all different shades of pink. Dil emerges from her bathroom, dressed in nothing but a robe, which is also pink, and as Fergus undresses her, the camera follows his gaze, panning down her body and lingering over her unexpected penis. The next shot is Fergus’ face, shocked and repulsed. “You did know, didn’t you?” Dil asks as she reaches for him, but Fergus slaps her hand away, hits her across the face, and runs to bathroom to vomit.

The film is able to justify Fergus’ disgust and horrible mistreatment of Dil because it takes the audience by surprise alongside him. Neither the viewer nor Fergus expects Dil to have a penis, and being caught off guard, Fergus and his sympathizers feel betrayed and lied to. She has tricked us all. Although she is hurt, both physically and emotionally, it does not take long for Dil to come around and forgive Fergus for the way he treated her, and this prompts the audience to feel the same way.

The Pathetic Transsexual: Transamerica

Transamerica tells the story of Bree, a middle aged transsexual woman only one week away from undergoing SRS (sexual reassignment surgery), or “bottom surgery,” when she gets a call that her teenage son is in prison. Up until this point, Bree was unaware that she had had a child in the first place, but she soon finds herself on a cross-country road trip with her delinquent son, Toby, who is completely unaware that the nice church lady who bailed him out is actually the father he never met.

Unlike *The Crying Game*, the audience knows that Bree is transgender from the beginning. There is no surprise, eliminating the possibility that the viewer ever feels betrayed by this trans character’s body. In fact, in the first 5 minutes, we are given every detail about her body, her gender performance, and her transition.

When we first meet Bree, she is practicing along with a video that teaches her how to make her voice sound more feminine while padding her bra, tucking herself into spunks, dressing herself in a pink skirt suit and putting on makeup. As she walks out of her house, we hear the audio of a conversation she is having with a doctor, listing all of the medical procedures she has had done to achieve the look she has: electrolysis, 3 years of hormone therapy and 5 separate facial surgeries. SRS will be her final procedure. The doctor responds to her by saying “you look very authentic.”

Before getting to know Bree’s character as a person, the audience is shown, step-by-step, how this “biological male” is made to look like the hyperfeminine idea of a woman. Bree’s daily ritual of cosmetics, voice training, and dressing herself in nothing but the color pink feels less like a regular morning routine and more like putting on an elaborate costume. Julia Serano argues that this is no accident. She believes that by

showing every nitty gritty detail of a trans woman getting ready for her day, portraying her gendered aesthetic as a facade:

*The media neutralizes the potential threat that trans femininities pose to the category of 'woman' by playing to the audience's subconscious belief that femininity itself is artificial....Thus, the media is able to depict trans women donning feminine attire and accessories without ever giving the impression that they achieve 'true' femaleness in the process.*²

This is what makes Bree “pathetic”. We can see that she is “trying to be a woman”, but by dissecting and exposing every aspect of her gender presentation, we see her womanhood as a performance as opposed to something that comes naturally to her. The filmmakers create the illusion that Bree is not a real woman, or at least not until her transition is complete.

When Bree’s son Toby finds out that she is transgender, it is, again, by catching a glimpse of her penis. As Bree gets out of the car for a moment to pee on the side of the road, Toby glances into the rearview mirror and sees her. While Toby feels instantly betrayed and disgusted, the audience does not share his anger, nor do they feel threatened by the presence of the phallus. Not only is the viewer in on Bree’s secret from the beginning, but also her penis is only seen for a brief moment out of the corner of Toby’s eye. This reveal differs from that of *The Crying Game* in that it takes up so little space. While Dil’s genitals are viewed in close up, the central focus of the shot, and inches away from Fergus’ face, Bree’s penis is just one detail in a frame that shows her entire body, and because he is watching through the rearview mirror, the audience is assured that Toby is at a safe distance from her genitalia and is therefore significantly less intimidated by it.

Misleading or Misunderstood

In both of these films, the cisgender male characters respond in a similar manner when they realize that the women they thought they knew have turned out to be transgender, but the audience is led to have two very different reactions. The audience has a sense of anxiety for Bree's sake, but the initial reaction to Dil's reveal is that she has tricked us all. As I have mentioned before, *The Crying Game* is not told from Dil's perspective, and who is the protagonist of the story does make a significant difference in who the viewer may choose to root for, but I believe that there are more deep-seeded biases at play.

Although Bree has not lied to the viewer, who has known her biological status since the very beginning, she has certainly lied to Toby. Not only has she actively kept her transness a secret from him, but she has also lied to him about the nature of their relationship. Toby learns that Bree is trans about halfway into the movie, but does not learn that she is his parent until the last 10 minutes, which I personally find it to be a far greater act of betrayal. In contrast, Dil does not actively lie to Fergus. In fact, she assumes that he was already aware of her secret and is surprised to learn that he was not. If anything, Fergus is the dishonest one in their relationship, hiding his name, his nationality, his profession, and a major detail, that he and his fellow IRA members are the reason her boyfriend was killed in the first place. Why then would the viewer side with Fergus?

First, one of the Bree's most defining characteristics throughout the film is that she is on a quest to get bottom surgery, the final step of her long journey to "become a woman". Dil, on the other hand, shows no sign at all of her intentions to physically

transition. This means that Dil has chosen to live, at least for the time being, as a woman full-time, and yet will continue to have a penis, defying the accepted norm of what is considered to be true womanhood. Secondly, it is essential to note that the relationship between Bree and Toby is platonic, as Bree has no intention of seducing her son. In contrast, Dil's body is revealed during a sexually intimate moment, and this is the real threat. It is not just that Fergus feels lied to; he is humiliated. He feels as though he has been attracted to a man the entire time, which not only completely disregards Dil's true gender, but also challenges everything Fergus knows about his own sexuality. Bringing us back to the "deceptive transsexual" concept, I refer to Julia Serano's analysis of this archetype. She writes, "In a tactic that emphasizes their 'true' maleness, 'deceivers' are most often used as pawns to provoke male homophobia in other characters, as well as in the audience itself."² The "deceptive transsexual" not only attacks the fundamentals of the binary gender system, but also threatens the heterosexuality of straight men, and by extension, their masculinity.

I'm Not Like Other Girls: The Sensational Transsexual

This model of the deceptive/pathetic dichotomy continues to apply well to film representation, but as the politics on transgender issues have been evolving, there has been a rise in mainstream media of "positive" transgender representation. I use the word positive, not necessarily because I believe it to be so, but because that is the general opinion among liberal cisgender Americans. I have coined this so-called positive public image of a trans woman "the sensational transsexual".

The sensational transsexual is placed on a pedestal, praised for her bravery and endurance throughout her gendered journey. She is often a non-fictional public figure, openly identifying not only as a woman, but as a transgender woman, and her television presence alone educates viewers as she is expected to represent the entirety of her very diverse community. The only reason the appearance of the sensational transsexual woman is a sign of progress is because she is less demonized than other stereotypes, but by no means is she less dehumanized. Unlike her pathetic counterpart, the sensational transsexual is able to “pass” as a woman, but because she is so honest and vulnerable about her past, putting her identity, her life experience, and often her body on display for the world to ogle at, she is not deceptive either. She is a good trans.

The most obvious example of the sensational transsexual in pop culture right now is Caitlyn Jenner. Already famous for her athletic achievements, winning America a gold medal for decathlon in the 1976 summer Olympics, and remaining in the public eye on the hit reality show *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, Jenner’s recent transition was followed by the media and millions of fascinated viewers. Just this last week, Time Magazine named Jenner a runner up for their Person of the Year award, referring to her as “the most famous transgender woman in the world”¹⁵. For many Americans, Caitlyn Jenner represents the entire transgender community. Personally, I find that to be unfortunate. As far as trans icons go, Jenner is highly problematic and yet probably holds more public power than any of her predecessors.

In her recent Time Magazine interview, for example, Jenner explains why her image of hyperfemininity and how she, “authentically kind of looks and plays the role” of a woman is so important, stating, “to be honest with you, if you look like a man in a dress,

it makes people uncomfortable.”¹⁶ Putting aside the deeply internalized transphobia that laces her commentary, Jenner seems to have no concept of the privilege she possesses in how easily she was able to transition, nor does she seem to understand how unfairly high she is setting the standards for the rest of the transgender population.

An overwhelming majority of trans women are unable to afford to physically transition completely, sometimes at all, and even fewer come out of their transition period, not only passing as cisgender, but also meeting the beauty standards society sets for American women. Jenner on the other hand, is white, attractive and remarkably wealthy. Not only is she able to afford any medical or cosmetic surgery she chooses to undergo, but also she has no financial trouble when it comes to her wardrobe. It is not difficult for her to present herself in the way she wants to, and because she is both ignorant of this reality and a public figure, she perpetuates a standard for people within her community that is almost impossible to achieve.

There are, of course, less problematic models of the sensational transsexual visible in the media today, and at first glance, their activism seems to be making tremendous progress for the trans community. One example is Janet Mock, an author, activist and trans woman of color, best known for her very first television appearance on *Piers Morgan Live* in 2014. Piers Morgan began this interview with Mock the way most liberal show-hosts tend to with transgender guests: he sensationalized her “remarkable life story,” told his audience that Mock was “born a boy,” used her birth name, and then offered up the classic cis so-called compliment, “So this is the amazing thing about you. Had I not known anything about your story, I would have had absolutely not a clue that you had ever been a boy, a male, which makes me absolutely believe that you should

always have been a woman,”¹⁰ all within the first minute of the segment. There is so much wrong with this introduction, but the most dangerous part about Morgan’s commentary is not that he refers to Mock’s past self with a name and gender that she does not identify with, not that he insinuates that cis-passing trans people are somehow more valid in their gender, and not even that he suggests that his opinion on whether or not Mock, “should always have been a woman” has any place in their conversation. No, the most dangerous part of this interview is that Morgan saw no issue at all with any of these points. In fact, at the time, he considered himself to be progressive. While Mock did very little to correct her misguided host during their interview, the activist was not shy to shame his behavior on social media. Mock used Twitter to criticize the interview, posting claims such as, “I was not ‘formerly a man.’ Pls [sic] stop sensationalizing my life and misgendering trans women.”¹¹ According to Piers Morgan, this “ignited a firestorm of abuse and vilification [Morgan’s] way,”¹¹ as many of her supporters and fellow trans people responded ferociously to the broadcast. The feud, though somewhat immaturely handled on both ends, did begin a widespread conversation about the language our culture uses for trans people.

Janet Mock is not the only trans woman changing how the media represents her community. In the spotlight right now is Laverne Cox of the popular series *Orange is the New Black*, who, beyond being a trans actress playing trans characters, has become an important voice for trans women of color and the violence that they face every day.⁸ In 2011, Isis King became the first trans contestant on *America’s Next Top Model*, a well-known reality show that had historically only featured cisgender women.³ Another former reality show contestant, Carmen Carrera from *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, decided to make her

transition very public on social media in hopes that she would inspire and educate her fans,⁶ many of whom are currently advocating for the supermodel to become the first transgender Victoria's Secret Angel. Andrej Pejic joins this list of well-known trans models, coming out as female during the height of her career. All of these women have spoken out about the way they are portrayed in the media, generously using their lives and their identities as teaching tools for the otherwise uninformed public, and at face value, they all seem to serve as positive representation for their community. However, they do not escape the "sensational transsexual" archetype.

Setting aside the fact that their choice to be so public about their transness continues to perpetuate the idea that strangers are entitled to know personal information about the bodies and lived experiences of trans women, all of these women, including Caitlyn Jenner, are entertainers. As models, actresses and reality television stars, the very nature of their respective professions is performativity. They are already sensationalized, but the fact that they are trans takes them over the line between prominent figure and fascinating spectacle.

Additionally, these women are often praised for their beauty, as supermodels and celebrities tend to be. Not only are they conventionally attractive; they are considered attractive to cisgender people, implying that they are conventionally feminine and cis-passing. In a video that parodies the insensitive clichés trans women encounter during nearly every television appearance, Janet Mock interviews a cis woman, opening first with "First off, you're beautiful, and what's so amazing about you is that if I were to look at you, I never would have known that you were not trans."⁹ Mirroring the way Piers Morgan began her own interview, Mock suggests that these two statements are meant to

be taken as the same compliment: you are beautiful because you look like what I consider to be a beautiful woman. Focusing on the appearance of any woman is in itself a misogynistic and yet normalized practice, but by holding trans women to the same standards as their cisgender counterparts, the media creates the harmful idea that a transgender woman can only be beautiful or valid if she, in the words of Caitlyn Jenner, “authentically kind of looks and plays the role.”¹⁶

Fixation on Genitalia

I am rather disturbed by the fact that so many people -who are neither medical professionals nor trans themselves- would want to hear all the gory details regarding transsexual physical transformations, or would feel that they have any right to ask us about the state of our genitals. It is offensive that so many people feel that it is okay to publicly refer to transsexuals as being “pre-op” or “post-op” when it would so clearly be degrading and demeaning to regularly describe all boys and men as being either “circumcised” or “uncircumcised.”

- Julia Serano²

Looking back at the earlier mentioned films, it is worth noting that, from day to day, the womanhood of both Dil and Bree generally goes unquestioned by strangers, because the way they present themselves, given their clothing, facial features and mannerisms, coincides with what said strangers assume a woman looks like. While it is unclear at what stage Dil may be in her transition, we know that Bree has undergone many medical procedures to make herself look as traditionally female as possible. This has nothing to do with genitalia. However, when it comes to the big reveal, both films chose to focus on the genitalia of the two characters in order to expose and define their transness, and suddenly, those around them no longer perceive these women as women. Because they are so private, genitals have little to no effect on how one is gendered in

public, and yet, they are given an overwhelming amount of attention when discussing trans bodies. This fixation goes far beyond fictional characters, and becomes a central focus the media has on actual transgender people, an incredibly disrespectful and yet normalized practice.

The invasive nature of public curiosity about trans bodies has been an ongoing conversation within the community, but recently, these issues have gained some mainstream attention, and much of the credit goes to one particular interview in 2014 on *Katie*, Katie Couric's daytime talk show, featuring Carmen Carrera and Laverne Cox. In Couric's one-on-one interview with Carrera, her questions started out with a focus on the model's career, but as the conversation began to shift towards her transition, Couric asking explicitly "your private parts are different now, aren't they?" Carrera shushed her well-meaning hostess and said, "I don't want to talk about it because it's really personal...In other interviews with other trans people they always focus on either the transition or the genitalia and I feel like there's more to trans people than just that."⁶ When Laverne Cox was invited onto the show later on in the episode, she added to Carrera's claim with a more political message: "I think that the preoccupation with transition and with surgery objectifies trans people and then we don't get to really deal with the lived experiences. The reality of trans people's lives is that so often we are targets of violence.... And if we focus on transition, we don't actually get to talk about those things."⁷ Though it may seem small, this was a monumental shift from exhibition to autonomy. The conversation about trans bodies had never before been controlled by those whose bodies were in question, and the fact that Katie Couric accepted this criticism respectfully and immediately corrected herself is just as important.

Unfortunately, though, this interview is an anomaly. Even after it has aired, many entertainment and news programs have continued to ask their transgender guests inappropriate questions, and besides being invasive, dehumanizing and downright disrespectful, this focus on genitalia as the most important step of transition perpetuates the idea that one's transition is not complete or valid without bottom surgery.

This expectation erases the fact that SRS is by no means an inexpensive procedure. The average price of MTF (male-to-female) bottom surgery itself is about \$10,000-\$15,000^{17, 18} which does not include the cost of anesthetic, hospitalization or travel (many women will leave the United States in search of higher quality surgeons and facilities). Additionally, many trans women will choose hormone treatment and cosmetic surgery without ever investing in SRS both because these services tend to be more affordable and because, despite the rhetoric surrounding genitalia, how they are perceived and gendered in public often makes a more significant difference in their day-to-day experience. Furthermore, for varying personal reasons, some trans women have no interest at all in changing their genitals, regardless of whether or not they are able to afford it. It is estimated that in this already small community, 0.3% of the US population, only about 13.33% of transgender-identified people will undergo SRS.¹⁹ So why is it then that we are fixated on something so rare and so private? Why do we depend on this detail, invisible to almost everyone, to define what category transgender people belong to?

The simple answer is sex. The idea that a heterosexual man can be attracted to a woman with a penis, or a woman who "used to be a man", totally disrupts the heteronormativity our society takes for granted. Trans people threaten what we know and understand about ourselves sexually. However, this sexual anxiety highlights an essential

issue in American patriarchal culture: cisgender heterosexual men feel entitled to intimate information about women's bodies, trans or otherwise, because they feel that they have the right to sexualize women in general.

The Consequences of Ignorance

I have come to understand that when a trans woman is called a man, that is an act of violence.

- Laverne Cox, from her speech at Creating Change 2014

The media representation of transgender women, or any minority group, dramatically shapes the ways in which these groups and identities are perceived, and in turn how individuals within these groups are treated. When there are cis-passing trans women on television being praised for their beauty, but trans women who do not pass existing off-screen, these real women's identities become invalidated and they are punished for not fitting into the binary gender standards that have been set for them. Even more dangerous, when films and television perpetuate the idea that transgender women perform their femininity in order to deceive the public, and more specifically men they wish to seduce, they create a culture of transmisogyny and homophobia. When it is believed that a trans woman is nothing but a man in disguise, or as Caitlyn phrased it, "a man in a dress,"¹⁶ she is seen as a deviant, as an imposter, and she is stripped of her identity and her humanity.

By Transgender Day of Remembrance this year, November 20th 2015, there have been 22 reported murders of transgender people in the U.S, almost all women of color, exceeding last year's count of 19. Of these murders, 11 cases have been solved. Of those solved cases, 10 of the victims were killed by cisgender men, 3 of which have been

confirmed to be romantically/sexually involved with their victims.^{12, 13} These statistics are not simply an example of the violence that arises within a culture that is transphobic, but also the violence that arises in a culture of male entitlement. Trans women are not killed simply because they defy gender norms, but because cisgender men see them as a threat to their own gender and sexual identities. Additionally, in an attempt to escape the hateful culture they have been born into, it is estimated that about 41% of trans people will at least attempt to commit suicide in their lifetime, almost 9 times higher than the average national rate.²⁰ But whether trans women are being murdered or taking their own lives, it is clear that this demographic is disproportionately affected by the violence and hatred of American culture.

Conclusion

Mainstream media is a powerful cultural phenomenon. It shapes culture, defining what is normal, what is morally acceptable, and what is to be condemned. An already stigmatized minority, the way transgender people are portrayed in the media has a massive impact on the public's understanding of this community. Whenever a transgender person is depicted in a film or telling their life story on national television, they hold that responsibility of representation. While we have begun to be more mindful of the negative stereotypes that are often perpetuated, we are still sensationalizing the trans experience by separating real trans people from fictional trans narratives.

Like clockwork, Hollywood has been churning out a new successful, high budget film featuring a transgender character every Oscar season for the last few years, patting themselves on the back for being so progressive. However, at the end of the day, trans

people are left out of these projects while cisgender people profit off their stories. With the exception of Laverne Cox in *Orange is the New Black*, trans women are not playing trans women in mainstream media. Between Jared Leto, who won an Oscar for his portrayal of an HIV positive trans woman in *Dallas Buyers Club*, and Eddie Redmayne, whose performance in *The Danish Girl* was already speculated to win him an Academy Award months before the film was released, white cisgender men are being praised for their heartbreaking, nuanced performances in such a challenging and unusual role. Meanwhile, legitimate criticism on these performances and films from the trans community goes completely unheard by the mainstream media. These films are not made for the benefit of trans women. They are not doing trans people any favors. We need to stop thinking about trans representation in terms of how cisgender screenwriters, directors and actors can make their fictional trans characters more authentic and politically correct. Instead, it is the cisgender ally's job to create a space in which trans people are able to speak for themselves.

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