

“I’m supposed to relate to this?”
A Trans Woman On Issues Of Identification With Trans Moving Images

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Abstract

This thesis challenges common assumptions of trans moving images by applying theories of identification to an autoethnographic close reading of three specific texts – *Hedwig and The Angry Inch* (John Cameron Mitchell, 2001), *Dallas Buyers Club* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2013) and *Transparent* (Jill Soloway, 2014) - considered by both mainstream and queer audiences to feature transgender characters and experiences. This thesis, while limited to the author’s experience as a trans woman, attempts to advance the argument that identification with trans moving images may change with one’s transition and require a reassessing of “what is trans” along with resituating the trans spectator from “object of the gaze” to “bearer of the look” (Mulvey, 1975).

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Prologue

How Am I Expected To Identify With This Gaze? Or Thoughts of a Trans Viewer

I knew from the moment I saw her hands that she was different.

She was stunning and even though I could not take my eyes off of her, I could tell that she had a secret. I looked around at all the other people in the darkened theatre and wondered if they knew her secret as well; I wondered if they knew that I shared the same secret.

As the film unspooled, I imagined a new script being written:

Scene: The Lowes Cinema, Downtown Montréal, 1992.

A young man, in his early twenties is enjoying the latest 'word of mouth' movie sensation with his female friend. The film is independently distributed by Miramax Films and was filmed entirely in Ireland and England. It has been marketed as an IRA thriller with a secret and for the first 60 minutes of its running time, the marketing has been dead on. The young couple, as well as the full house, has been on the edge of their seats since the opening credits. The biggest thrill, however, comes at the halfway mark in the narrative. It turns out that our gorgeous, sensual and passionate female lead is not what she appears to be. The audience gasps in horror and revulsion as they discover that the woman who had been charming them since she first emerged on screen had... a penis.

Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* was a critical and commercial smash earning six Academy Award nominations including one for Best Supporting Actor for Jaye Davidson's portrayal of Dil, the film's transgender heroine (Daniel & Jackson, 2003, p. 119). What followed the 'big reveal' was an amiable love story involving a rogue IRA soldier named Fergus and a trans woman that contained no sex and no possibilities for anything more than flirty banter between the two leads. After all, Dil had 'deceived' Fergus. How could he ever trust her?

At the time, I hadn't even considered the possibility that I may indeed be trans myself. I knew how I felt inside but I had no idea how to reconcile these emotions. It was 1992, and I wondered if I could ever transition in a world where people were afraid of transsexuals. I was amazed by Jaye Davidson's ability to convey on-screen the femininity that I felt inside, but did the screenwriters have to make her 'big secret' appear to be so deceitful? Did the audience have to cheer when Fergus discovered Dil's secret and punched her in the face? I wanted to look up to Dil. I wished that I could be as confident, charming, and beautiful as she was. I wanted someone I could aspire to be, just like everyone else. I wanted to see some variation of myself up on the big screen. I wanted the world to know that trans people were just like them. *The Crying Game* showed them that we weren't like them.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Does the autobiographical piece in the above prologue sound familiar to you? If you're trans, or simply fascinated (however problematic that may be) by the trans experience, you've either experienced it or seen it before in some form of pop media. I finally came out as trans in summer of 2006, after years of internalized transphobia and shame brought on by harmful representations of trans people doomed to failure. My story (thankfully) has a happy ending even if these types of representations kept me in the closet longer than they should have. For many trans people, their ending is not as happy. The rate of suicide or suicidal attempts is higher amongst the trans community than any other marginalized group. According to a recent study, 41% of the trans community reported a lifetime suicide attempt compared to only 4.6% of the entire U.S. population (Haas, Rodgers, & Herman, 2014). Statistics on acts of violence and homicide toward trans women of colour are horrifying (O'Hara, 2014). In 2012, 53% of anti-LGBTQ homicides were transgender women, while 73% of all anti-LGBTQ homicide victims were people of colour (Giovanniello, 2013). Negative representations of trans people in pop culture may be one of the reasons behind these horrible statistics. In the same way that mainstream audiences consider gay stereotypes acceptable regardless of the harmful implications they present, cinematic trans representations may allow for the use of verbal or physical violence as a defense to the unveiling of the trans person (women, in particular) on film as well as in real life. While it has never been proven that specific trans representations have a perlocutory power, they legitimize transphobic discourses and behaviors.

I have seen many trans moving images since *The Crying Game*, but I have yet to see one Hollywood film (not including bio-pics) that does not use a trans character as a murderer as in *Dressed To Kill* (Brian DePalma, 1980), *The Silence Of The Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991) and *Sleepaway Camp* (Robert Hiltzik, 1983); a gimmick as in *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992) and *Transamerica* (Duncan Tucker (2005); or to generate laughs through the “repulsive” unveiling of a penis on a woman as in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (Tom Shadyac, 1994), *The Naked Gun 33 1/3* (Peter Segal, 1994) and *The Hangover Part II* (Todd Phillips, 2011). All of these moving images and the trans archetypes they reference had a profound affect on my coming out narrative. Imagine if trans characters in the movies weren’t all serial killers or the punch line to a joke. Would I have come out sooner? What if trans people could be the “bearer of the look” (Mulvey, 1975) rather than the “object of the gaze”? Would this inspire trans people to become a part of a creative and cathartic process of storytelling?

Recent contributions to the scholarly research are starting to look past the male gaze and to an understanding of media representations informed by trans people (Ryan J. R., 2009; Leung, *Keywords: FILM*, 2014), but much of the academic work available on trans moving images is not current and does not reflect the social and cultural human rights shifts taking place. This is not to disregard the incredible amount of pop culture discussion of trans moving images that are also valid and ongoing in both trans and cis gender blogs, forums, and online magazines. These passionate voices need to be heard as well and - as such - I have sourced quite a number of respected trans blog writers in my references.

Much of the available scholarly literature (at the time of this research) on trans moving images is confined to defining gender and sexuality through the lens of psychoanalytic theory (Halberstam, 2005). While Freudian and Lacanian theory provides the foundation for the better part of film theory, it has succeeded only in reproducing problematic concepts of a gender binary where subversion of this binary leads to either laughter (at the expense of the character) or death (of the character) (Phillips, 2006, pp. 3, 19, 21). If voyeuristic visual pleasure is derived from objectifying the cinematic object (according to Freud) and narcissistic visual pleasure is obtained through self-identification with that same object (according to Lacan) (Smelik, 1999), can it not be said that film theory acts as a gatekeeper to trans moving images much in the way that psychoanalysis acts as a gatekeeper towards trans peoples' access to health care? The theory used in this discourse determines the spectator and thereby distances itself from the actual lived experience of trans people. In other words, it could be argued that film theory pathologizes trans folk much in the way that the medical community does. As a trans woman, I feel alienated by film theory's use of psychoanalysis.

A close reading of selected trans moving images will account for how I receive and/or identify with various media archetypes and how they impact and/or influence my personal narrative. Creative and historical autoethnographic pieces - that I refer to as "pseudo scripts" - are strategically placed throughout the text to better situate the reader to my experience. Two films and one serialized program will be analyzed to demonstrate the problematic nature of current trans moving images with my corpus extending past the traditional Hollywood model in order to explore how trans bodies and trans archetypes are seen in independent film and online streaming services. *Hedwig and The Angry Inch*

(John Cameron Mitchell, 2001) is based on an Off-Broadway musical about a supposed transgender rock star (and part-time prostitute). *Dallas Buyers Club* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2013) is an Oscar-winning film starring a rock star as a supposed transgender prostitute. *Transparent* (Jill Soloway, 2014) is an Amazon original series that tells the coming-out story of a 68 year-old family patriarch and his transition from male to female. It should be noted that all of these characters are white and played by cisgender male-identified actors.

I put forth the notion that trans activism needs to move past the grassroots venue of informal online conversation and into a more critical field of scholarly research capable of unpacking a wide range of challenges facing trans communities like trans representation in - and reception of - moving images. Scholarly research on issues pertinent – yet common - to trans experience conducted through an autoethnographic method (to be fully explained in Chapter 4) allows for the legitimization of the (marginalized) trans voice by the academy’s traditionally heteronormative patriarchal cisgender power structure. This is my activism.

By placing myself at the center of the discourse on the validity and viability of the mere inclusion of trans moving images in Hollywood productions as a “good thing”, I shift the discussion away from trans image object and towards trans spectator reception and identification.

Chapter 2: Pre-op and Post-op

Scene: The Family Room, Middle of Suburbia, Mid-Eighties.

A 15-year-old teen boy sits transfixed in front of the family television. He sits about 2 feet from the screen so that he has immediate access to the on/off switch in case someone enters the room and surprises him. He is watching a daytime talk show and the woman being interviewed is discussing her life story and how she was born a boy. The woman's name is Caroline Cossey but she uses the stage name Tula. Tula only appeared on the silver screen once - as one of a bevy of bikini clad models in the 1981 James Bond thriller *For Your Eyes Only* (John Glen, 1981). Her silent part caused outrage and curiosity when the British tabloid press decided to out her based on her 15 seconds of screen time (Edgren, 1991). Tula discusses how she fooled *Playboy* magazine when she appeared nude in a June 1981 pictorial about the movie (Edgren, 1991). Tula is striking and the boy is looking for any clues that may reveal her masculine past. He finds none and wonders how it is possible. He tries to find a copy of Tula's autobiography at every bookshop he can think of.

It is important to mention that my transition from male to female required a literature review of its own. My gender library consists of dozens of memoirs written by trans people from all across the gender and sexuality spectrum. These works were written by individuals willing to share their experiences as a form of catharsis as well as to create an understanding of what it means to be trans and this includes the psychological and medical processes involved in their respective decisions (Novic M.D., 2005) (Addams, 2003) (Rose, 2006). While these texts were informative with respect to questions of surgeries and familial obligations, they did not reflect on the impact of pop culture on gender identity and identification.

2.1) Literature Review

There are five important elements that collectively form my literature review. The first element is the trans character, the limited scope of actions afforded these characters, and the problematic issue of having cisgender actors in these roles. The second element is the social anxiety that cross dressing has on cisgender heteronormative audiences and how it desexualizes the trans person. The third element looks at the male gaze and its effect on how we look at trans moving images. The fourth element explores current research and how changes to definitions of “trans film” and the creation of transgender studies are impacting the lives of trans people with regards to popular culture. The fifth element takes a brief look at the impact that societal repudiation has on trans people.

2.1.1) The Trans Character

Hollywood’s cinematic representations of gender diverse people have been problematic since Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle first appeared in drag in the silent films of the early twentieth century (Russo, 1981, p. 6). Historical context makes it undoubtedly difficult to distinguish between trans people and female impersonators in cross dressing and drag roles in films previous to the 1980s. As American film narratives changed, many drag performers appeared in bit roles in films starting in the late 1960s and into the 1970s – particularly those set in New York City and requiring a more seedy sexualized vibe. Films like *Midnight Cowboy* (John Schlesinger, 1969) and *And Justice For All* (Norman Jewison, 1979) portrayed cross dressers in a more sympathetic light, however it is never made clear whether or not these characters were supposed to be read as gay men or trans (Bell-Metereau, 1985).

While shifts in popular culture have (very) slowly been embracing gay and lesbian characters and personalities, trans people are still facing the same marginalizing and harmful representations. To make matters worse, cisgender actors have played the majority of trans characters in film and other media effectively shutting out trans people from the creative process and control of their own narratives. In addition to creating yet another barrier to employment, preventing trans actors the opportunity of receiving paid acting roles furthers the systemic erasure of trans identities and only reinforces the notion that showy make-up enhanced transformations (by cisgender actors) are nothing more than awards show bait (Markovitz, 2014). While it is welcoming to see trans actors like Laverne Cox, Harmony Santana, and Jamie Clayton on screen telling trans narratives, the Hollywood system still relies on cis gender actors like Eddie Redmayne and Elle Fanning to secure financing for stories about trans people as with *The Danish Girl* (Tom Hooper, 2015) and *About Ray* (Gaby Dellal, 2015).

Trans moving images in cinema appear to follow specific character archetypes and tropes that are repeated from narrative to narrative. John Phillip's *Transgender on Screen* (2006) is an academic unpacking of four separate styles of filmic transgender representation: Cross-dressing in film comedy, Psycho-trans, Drama Queens and Macho Men, and Shemale internet pornography (The author chooses to capitalize each of these archetypes). Phillips frames his analysis of the trans moving images around the "repression of sexual undercurrents" in movies where the gender binary moves from its static position into one of fluidity (Phillips, 2006, pp. 14-15). The following hypotheses (I've italicized the titles for clarity) are used to find common ground amongst those Hollywood films that form Phillips' corpus (Phillips, 2006, p. 14): *The Normativity of*

Western Popular Culture - and its demonization of gender and sexual difference – allows for performances that caricature, rather than express realness within trans experiences. This is demonstrated by not only having cis gender actors play trans people, but by having performances of gender so over-the-top that it is almost as if this is the only way that the actors feel a mainstream audience will relate to gender difference (Phillips, 2006, p. 15).

Temporary and Permanent Change discusses how the temporariness of transvestism is tolerated and sometimes even celebrated for its “playfulness” and “subversive” nature. Unfortunately, the permanent changes of the transgender body and mind are seen as “threatening to a capitalist labor system” that function through the reinforcement of the gender binary system (Phillips, 2006, p. 17). What Phillips argues is that comedies drift toward the temporary and thrillers involve the permanent, confirming that transsexuality is feared in our society and transvestism is regarded as playful (at least in the movies) (Phillips, 2006, p. 17).

The Veiling and Unveiling of Truth details certain tropes that can be found throughout the films critiqued by Phillips. Structures of “disguise/deception and unveiling/revelation” can be found in all films with trans characters. Depending on the genre of film, the audience receives and experiences these narrative structures through emotions that vary from elation to revulsion (Phillips, 2006, p. 18). All the narratives involve a “quest for truth through revelation of the hidden” and that successful and “sophisticated” narratives avoid the “death of closure”. Phillips sites *The Crying Game* and how cis gender protagonist Fergus’s true feelings for “the transgender Dil” are left open as the film comes to a close (Phillips, 2006, p. 21).

Phillips' work suggests that filmic trans narratives can be analyzed "in terms of a quest for truth, through revelation of the hidden" (Phillips, 2006, p. 21). He traces concepts of the deception of the trans person followed by the revelation of her (or his) true identity back to Michel Foucault's *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century Hermaphrodite* (Foucault, 1980). Foucault writes that it is through sex that we search for "the most secret and profound truths about the individual" (Foucault, 1980, p. X). Phillips ultimately concedes that the audience's need to know the true sex of the character taints the narrative process by allowing the audience (after the unveiling) to return to a comfortable place of narrative normality. I find it quite problematic that one needs to (or is expected to) align their creative process with the needs of the audience rather than by introducing audiences to new narratives – that while uncomfortable for the moment – may positively affect personal narratives.

Trans activist and biologist Julia Serano tackles the same tropes and archetypes found in Phillips' work. In her book *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman On Sexism And The Scapegoating Of Femininity* (Serano, 2006), Serano brings an understanding of trans moving images to a wider audience by applying her personal experience as a trans woman to a critique of trans media representation. Serano's *Trans Woman Archetypes in The Media* (Serano, pp. 36-41) describes how trans people in Hollywood films tend to fall into two categories: the "deceptive transsexual" or the "pathetic transsexual". The deceptive transsexual uses her femininity – and ability to pass as cis-gender - to seduce the audience, while the pathetic transsexual's failure to "achieve a convincing form of femininity is played for sympathy or laughs" (Serano, pp. 36,38). I find that Serano covers much of the same ground as Phillips, most likely because the concept of the trans

woman archetype is not new. Rebecca Bell-Metereau (Bell-Metereau, 1985) wrote about audience identification with the sympathetic androgynous character in her text *Hollywood Androgyny* back in 1985 (pp. 193-200). What makes Serano's text different is how her lived-experience as a trans woman lends importance to her particular reading of the theory.

More recent Hollywood offerings, starting with *Transamerica* (Duncan Tucker, 2005) have demonstrated a shift away from the traditional trans woman seductress and serial killer portrayals of the 1970s-1990s toward a more sympathetic portrayal of the transsexual in film (Sullivan, 2000). Serano writes that these 'pathetic' characters are usually male to female transsexuals who don't fit the stereotypical role of the (hyper)feminine and they can usually be found in television *movies of the week* or as made for cable specials with titles like *Normal* (Jane Anderson, 2003). The 'sympathetic' is sometimes mixed in with the 'pathetic' in order to create characters that the audience is capable of relating to even if they have never met a trans person. This was the case with the Oscar-nominated *The World According To Garp* (George Roy Hill, 1982) (Serano, 2006, p. 39), the Oscar-winning *Dallas Buyers Club* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2013) and pretty much any biographical film with a cross dressing protagonist since Ed Wood's *Glen or Glenda* (Ed Wood, 1953).

2.1.2) Cross Dressers and Social Anxiety

I have found that initial research into trans moving images starts with examinations of cross-dressing in film rather than sex change. This is most likely due to the limited information available at the time about what was then referred to as transsexuality. In her own research into trans representations, Deborah Mellamphy

(Mellamphy, 2009) uses Marjorie Garber (Garber, 1992) and Robert Stoller's opposing theories on trans imagery in her exploration of cinematic cross dressing in Tim Burton's *Ed Wood* (Tim Burton, 1994), a bio-pic of the world's best known worst film director.

According to Garber, cross dressing individuals cause a "destabilization of the genders" that calls for a "third term" or "third sex" outside of the gender binary. It is only through the creation of this new gender category that social anxiety towards the cross dresser can be alleviated and a "crisis of the category" (AKA the gender binary) averted (Garber, 1992). Stoller's understanding of gender rests in the idea that one cannot alter her or his gender through cross dressing. He believes that gender cannot be subverted because one does not truly change whom they are by how they dress. Stoller writes that the figure of the transvestite only serves to reinforce the differences between masculinity and femininity. Cross dressing serves to "accentuate, not dissipate" the masculine identities and attributes of the transvestite. He theorizes that since the transvestite knows that his core gender is male, he is only capable of performing femininity when dressed as the opposite gender (Mellamphy, 2009). According to Stoller, the clothes maketh the woman - so to speak - and the transvestite is incapable of transitioning across gender lines without them.

Mellamphy's article discusses how Hollywood's use of cross dressing in films – mostly comedies – erases the fetishistic and/or sexual aspect of the transvestite. Hollywood transvestite narratives revolve around a cis-gender heterosexual male whose financial or social situation has forced him to cross dress and perform femininity as a means of survival. The male protagonist never derives any erotic sensation from dressing as a woman. Mellamphy concludes that Hollywood's conservative nature, with regards to

cross dressing narratives, desexualizes the transvestite and erases transgender lived-experience in order to appeal to mainstream (and closeted) audiences (Mellamphy, 2009).

Thanks to social media, I discovered that I was not alone when it came to my lack of engagement with Hollywood's trans moving images. Nor was I alone in my frustration towards its apparent neglect of trans lived experience and lauding of drag performance. Jared Leto's performance in *Dallas Buyers Club* (Borten & Wallack, 2012) was the latest in a string of (mainstream) critically rewarded interpretations of gender swapping. Unlike previous times when the rewards for playing the opposite sex was akin to portraying characters with medical conditions, physical or psychological traumas and disabilities, this time criticism from the other side of the bench was finally given voice. This time the trans community's response was impossible to ignore. While the accolades for Leto's performance kept coming, so did questions of why they could not cast a trans performer in the role. Playwright MJ Kaufman states the importance of casting trans actors in order to make trans bodies visible because our lives are directly impacted by transphobia (Rohwer, 2013). Trans actors cast in roles other than pathetic or deceptive archetypes would go a long way toward eliminating the common perception that trans people are unlovable and that violence against them is justified (Rohwer, 2013). Being trans should not have to equal suffering, where respect is earned out of pity (Clark, 2014).

2.1.3) The Gaze

As a trans woman, I have had plenty of experience being stared at, especially during the difficult first few years of transition where my hair was in the process of growing out and my face was a red swollen blotchy mess of whiteheads from hours of

weekly electrolysis sessions. The intense feeling – real or perceived – of being the object of the gaze has a profound effect on those who are marginalized.

The common use of the term *the gaze* in pop culture and social media can be traced back to how Laura Mulvey applied psychoanalytic theory to film criticism in her article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975). Her text used the work of director Alfred Hitchcock to create a template through which female characters in film are viewed as objects by both men and women through a “male gaze” that is steeped in Freudian psychoanalysis and Lacan’s mirror stage. This means that we – the audience – view the narrative through the eyes of the male protagonist and live the film through his experience and experience a “pleasure in looking” (known as Freudian “scopophilia”) at the images up on the screen. The camera is used as a sadistic tool of voyeurism where the audience sits in a darkened theatre and exerts power over the viewed images. Freudian and Lacanian concepts relating to castration and the lack (of a penis or a phallus) are used as a way to illustrate the way in which the male gaze is focused on erotic images of women regardless of whether or not they are relevant to the narrative structure of the film. These images are usually cis-gendered white women in sexualized positions, angles, and clothing (Mulvey, 1975, p. 9).

Mulvey’s theory assumes that all viewers “look” at things the same way and through the same lens. Her use of Freudian theory leads her to treat all viewers as “ideal subjects” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 73). The viewer is no longer an individual looking at images on a screen but rather “socially constructed by the cinematic apparatus” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 73) and “structured by a patriarchal unconsciousness” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 76) geared towards creating images

pleasurable to (cisgender heterosexual) men. As a trans woman, I can assure you that I do not view trans characters through a traditional male gaze. I do not look at trans characters as objects because I do not adopt a male gaze when I look at images. I refuse to look at images through cross-identification with the male cisgender heteronormative spectator. My gaze is an expression of my identity. Mulvey's theory, therefore, leaves open the option *not* to enjoy looking. The *not enjoying* of these images highlights the necessity "to take into account the social and historical conditions of spectatorship" (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 85) in order to resist dominant images and resituate the trans viewer.

Judith Jack Halberstam, in her book *In A Queer Time & Place* (2005), introduces us to what she calls the "transgender gaze". Halberstam's theory takes Laura Mulvey's foundational theory of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) and applies a queer lens to it. Halberstam's "transgender gaze" relies on "the successful solicitation of affect – revulsion, sympathy, empathy – in order to give mainstream viewers access to a transgender gaze" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 77). This transgender gaze allows the viewer access to the trans character's place in the film's narrative through the film's male protagonist. We are expected to react to the trans character in the same way as the film's protagonist. For example, if the film's protagonist feels sympathy towards the trans character, then we are expected to feel sympathy as well. If he feels revulsion toward the trans character – as when Dil is revealed to be trans in director Neil Jordan's I.R.A. thriller *The Crying Game* (1992) – then we as an audience are supposed to react accordingly (in this case with violence).

As with Mulvey, Halberstam's theory positions the viewer - male - as a participant in the traditional male gaze while women view the narrative by cross

identifying with the male protagonist and his way of looking (Halberstam, 2005, p. 78). In films where the trans character's reveal is meant to elicit revulsion by way of her deception, the male viewer is forced to "rewind the narrative and unlearn" what he thought he knew about the character and relearn the narrative through a new gaze (Halberstam, 2005, p. 78). While Halberstam's theory furthers Mulvey's male gaze, it only allows for a trans person to be the "object of the gaze". Halberstam's transgender gaze does not really foster an understanding of actual trans lived experience. It does not consider the implications of the trans person as a member of the audience. By forgetting to include the effect that gazing by trans people *on* trans moving images has on their subjectivity, Halberstam reinforces cis and trans relationships where trans people are to be pitied or reviled¹.

Joelle Ruby Ryan writes from the perspective of a self-proclaimed trans media critic, as her life experience informs her research into trans media images and representations (Ryan J. R., 2009). Her work is important because it reveals how these images often neglect – or erase - the social, cultural, and political aspects of the lives of trans people. Ryan writes how sensationalist details about sex change surgeries and other body modifications are over-represented and the majority of cinematic trans narratives revolve around "true life" biographical stories like *The Christine Jorgensen Story* (Irving Rapper, 1970) and *Second Serve* (Anthony Page, 1986), based on the life of tennis star Renée Richards (Ryan J. R., 2009, pp. 14-15). Ryan's greater contribution to trans knowledge production may be that she identifies the problematic nature of situating trans

¹ Halberstam's transgender gaze deviates from this theory in her critique of *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberly Pierce, 1999), the true-life story of Brandon Teena, a female to male (FTM) trans person who was raped and murdered when her birth identity is revealed. Halberstam writes that Pierce constructs a

studies within the gap between the field of Women's Studies and LGBT studies (Ryan J. R., 2009, pp. 19-20). She articulates how the biggest challenge facing those who choose to work within the field of trans studies is that there is "no core theory... nor is there a universal methodology associated with the field" (Ryan J. R., 2009, p. 19). I find this to be refreshing rather than problematic because it ultimately allows for new knowledge production.

2.1.4) What is Trans in film?

With the publication of the first volume of TSQ* (Transgender Studies Quarterly) by Duke University Press, through the University of Arizona's Institute for LGBT Studies, trans studies finally takes its place alongside the field of Gay and Lesbian studies in the academy. The creation of a scholarly trans studies journal provides for clearer definitions of concepts within the field of study, and for the purposes of this thesis, a clearer definition of what exactly "trans in film" encompasses.

It is too easy to simply consider the appearance of trans characters within the narrative as the definition of a trans film. TSQ* chooses to problematize trans films by considering factors like the inclusion of trans actors and trans filmmakers in their definition of *trans film* (Leung, Keywords: FILM, 2014, p. 86). Helen Hok-Sze Leung writes that "who decides which (of these) criteria is important, in what contexts, and for what reasons" ultimately determines why a film is considered trans (Leung, Keywords: FILM, 2014, p. 86) and it is for this reason that the trans community must participate in the artistic and business sides of film production. Hollywood films featuring trans or cross dressing characters have been destined for mainstream audiences, so our stories are being told by outsiders for outsiders - unlike films targeting specific female or African-

American demographics like *Bridesmaids* (Paul Feig, 2011) or *The Butler* (Lee Daniels, 2013). Textual and discourse analyses currently form the framework for examining the cinematic affect and effect on/of trans aesthetics but research is being done to examine trans audience reception (Leung, *Keywords: FILM*, 2014, p. 87). The traditional Western framework of trans studies and film critique is being challenged as gender variance is viewed differently depending on location, and context of the auteur and the audience (Leung, *Keywords: FILM*, 2014, p. 88).

2.1.5) Do Trans Moving Images Affect Trans Lived-Experience?

Christopher A. Shelley's research on trans people explores the social repudiation they face during their daily lives and, most importantly, the various systems of oppression that exist within government/medical structures and social behavioral hierarchies (Shelley, 2008). Shelley interviewed twenty trans people living in Vancouver, British Columbia on a variety of subjects and aspects of their daily lives in order to gain insight into how their social and economic circumstances have affected their coming out narratives (Shelley, 2008, p. 12). He writes that media carries ideological content that provides normative images of gendered behavior (Shelley, 2008, p. 134) while trans moving images have been contradictory in nature and have had both positive and negative effects on the lives of trans people. On the one hand, these images allow trans people to know that they are not alone. On the other hand, the majority of media representations portray trans people as freaks and deviants (Shelley, 2008, p. 135). Shelley writes how even the negative interpretations of trans people allow for the "transmission... that healing of the mis-sexed body is possible" and this information alone is life saving (Shelley, 2008, p. 135). I find it upsetting and unsettling that this

conclusion of his falls at the end of a paragraph that graphically describes that horrific modus operandi of Buffalo Bill, *The Silence of the Lambs*' (not quite) transsexual serial killer (Shelley, 2008, p. 135). Shelley's research and interviews with trans people apparently "confirm that for some the media did incite a change of sex/gender consciousness" (Shelley, 2008, p. 137). I am not sure how Shelley could make such a general statement on a research that was so limited in scope. In addition, I disagree with Shelly's belief that "for some" any production of trans moving images may be "life saving" (Shelley, 2008, p. 137). Perhaps when there are no representations of trans people in moving images it can be argued that any representation is good representation, but at the moment there are enough trans moving images to start a discourse on the effects of good images versus negative images. Then again, one cannot assume that media, including cinema, have direct influences and a perlocutory power on individuals.

On the cinematic front, Shelley writes that – with the exception of *Boys Don't Cry* – the majority of trans characters are portrayed with sympathy and respect for the trans lived-experience and, for the most part, without the previous reliance on "extreme and violent repudiations that threaten the lives of trans people" (Shelley, 2008, p. 135). He only mentions six films and two documentaries in defense of this position and does not provide any information other than his comments with respect to *Boys Don't Cry* – which is the story of a trans man (not a trans woman) and falls into the category of being a bio-pic. I find that Shelley's analysis of *Boys Don't Cry* as being unsympathetic to trans people challenges Halberstam's more nuanced reading of the film where the viewer – at times – is asked to adopt the protagonist's transgender gaze (Halberstam, 2001).

2.2) Research Question

2.2.1) Transitioning Times

There has never been so great a presence of trans people in the media and popular culture as now. Trans activist and star of Netflix hit *Orange Is The New Black*, Laverne Cox is the first out trans person to ever be nominated for a television Emmy Award. She was even awarded the coveted cover of TIME magazine for a story called *The Transgender Tipping Point* that argues how trans rights are the next civil rights movement (Steinmetz, 2014). Former People Online editor and current Marie Claire contributor Janet Mock saw her autobiography *Redefining Realness* hit the New York Times best-seller list (Molloy P. M., 2014), and gender bending supermodel Andreja Pejic came out as a trans woman in July 2014 (Molloy P. , 2014). While it is encouraging that the mainstream media reported all of these trans narratives positively, it reinforces compulsory heterosexuality where female-identified artists' creative talents and contributions are overshadowed by their physical appearance and their straight intimate relationships. They are lauded for being rather than for doing.

Trans people are still being used by the media to recount the stories they feel will best suit their audience while “negating the lived experience of trans people outside of the white middle class” (Namaste V. , Beyond Image Content: Examining Transsexuals' Access To The Media, 2012, p. 478). Trans people are allowed to speak so long as it is in response to questions posed by cis-gender interviewers (Namaste V. , Beyond Image Content: Examining Transsexuals' Access To The Media, 2012, p. 478). The questions asked are still centered on surgeries and sexuality. For example, People Magazine's headline about Pejic's coming out suggested she was now a woman *because* she had sex

reassignment surgery (Molloy P. , 2014). The legal, health, and economic ramifications of being trans are erased and replaced by an autobiographical imperative that expects trans people to respond to all personal questions concerned with the construction of neo-vaginas and phalluses (Namaste V. , Beyond Image Content: Examining Transsexuals' Access To The Media, 2012, p. 479). Trans people are not allowed to control their own coming out narratives, whether in (purported) news media or in fictional cinematic storytelling.

The irony behind the recent positive media coverage of trans celebrities is that they challenge the common assumption of the erasure of trans women of colour. Laverne Cox and Janet Mock are both trans women of colour so the usual professional and white middle-class credentials required for trans media exposure (Namaste V. , Beyond Image Content: Examining Transsexuals' Access To The Media, 2012, pp. 480-481) are finally being subverted but it is still in the interest of presenting a more palatable image of trans people for mainstream viewing audiences. Fortunately, Janet Mock and Laverne Cox have been challenging the “autobiographical imperative” (Namaste V. , 2012) by refusing to answer questions that aren’t relevant to the lived experience of trans people (Molloy P. M., 2014).

It looks as if the discourse that Mock and (especially) Cox have begun is starting to take hold. Laverne Cox hosted a documentary called *The T Word* that was broadcast in the United States on both the queer LOGO network and the more mainstream MTV. The program focused on the lives of seven young trans adults and addressed topics like dating, violence, coming out, and sports. A live trans forum, also hosted by Cox, where she and the program’s participants fielded questions via social media followed the

program (Kellaway, 2014). A second documentary series, *True Trans With Laura Jane Grace* premiered on the AOL network in time for National Coming Out Day 2014 (October 11). In it, Grace travels the United States meeting up with other trans women and trans men who share their stories with her. Grace is the frontwoman of punk band *Against Me!*. She publicly came out as a trans woman in *Rolling Stone* magazine in 2012 (Out.com Editors, 2014).

If Cox, Mock, and Grace represent a new wave of trans people in the popular culture making it easier for us to see ourselves as bearer of the look, the same cannot be said for trans moving images, especially in Hollywood. As I have mentioned in earlier sections, cisgender screenwriters, directors, and actors are telling our stories and continuing to objectify us. There is an assumption that the advances and positive media acceptance of Cox and Mock signals a pop culture change in trans moving images. The question that begs investigation is: How do trans people identify with and view themselves with regard to images that have been positively received by a cisgender and heteronormative viewing public? I explore the disjuncture between positive, neutral, and negative trans moving images and their effect on our subjectivity in order to challenge the complacency surrounding the easy acceptance of all trans moving images as being considered a good step forward.

2.2.2) Transitioning Minds

According to GLAAD's *2014 Studio Responsibility Index (SRI)*, which monitors LGBT inclusion in major studio releases, trans female characters made up 11.9% of all LGBT characters accounted for in the 17 releases that featured LGBT characters (GLAAD, p. 8). The SRI goes so far as to refer to these trans characters as "impressions"

rather than “characters” while the overwhelming majority of the trans females reported were white. There were no impressions of trans men whatsoever.

As I mentioned earlier, trans people are a marginalized group who are constantly being monitored and pathologized by the medical establishment. I will demonstrate how varying theories of identification provide a form of critique that can foster an understanding between representational models and lived experience. Activists like Laverne Cox and Janet Mock have successfully started a positive shift in how the cisgender heteronormative media perceives trans people but a wider lens is required that is inclusive of trans bodies across intersections of beauty, age, race, social class, ableness, and sexual orientation. The field of transgender studies is new and open to the development of theories that can be transformative and compassionate towards trans people. By addressing the gaps in the literature concerning trans moving images and viewer identification, my thesis will situate myself - the trans viewer - as “bearer of the look” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001) and not simply as the “object of the gaze” (Mulvey, 1975).

My thesis proposes several questions regarding trans moving images and identification that will be examined through my corpus: Do current trans moving images - and the way we watch them - help or hinder trans identified people? Specifically, does the transing of Hedwig Robinson in *Hedwig and The Angry Inch* help or hinder my identification with trans moving images? Does the creation of Rayon - in *Dallas Buyers Club* - as representative of the LGBT community help or hinder my identification with trans moving images? Does the nuanced portrayal of Maura Pfefferman’s late life transition in *Transparent* help or hinder my identification with trans moving images?

With respect to this thesis, does this particular set of trans moving images help or hinder my identification with trans identity? Does my trans spectator position – like my transition from closeted trans viewer to out trans woman - shift over time?

My research provides an analysis of these specific trans moving images through a lens of autoethnographic identification that replaces traditional gazing so that my lived experience as a trans woman may be represented accordingly. The intention of my thesis is to analyze and challenge the transness of current Hollywood trans moving images, the effect they have on my subjectivity, and to open the discourse up to new readings of what are trans moving images.

Chapter 3: Looks Familiar

Scene: The Bedroom, Winnipeg, 2004.

The young man spends much of his time working out of town on business. He has a nice apartment that he shares with his brother. His job affords him the luxury of his own room with a television and DVD player. The young man, still in denial of his true self, has ordered the movie *Soldier's Girl* (Frank Pierson, 2003) from Amazon.com and it has finally arrived. The film tells the true story of an army private who falls in love with a trans woman. The young man sits down to watch the film and is amazed not by the power and emotion of the story, but by the amazing transformation of actor Lee Pace into the movie's main protagonist Calpernia Addams. The young man is taken by her beauty and feminine demeanor but he wonders whether he is attracted to her or he wishes to be her.

3.1) Introduction

The coming out of a trans character is rarely seen on screen. We only get to see the aftermath. We only get to see where their obviously terrible decisions have led them. We see trans characters shunned by family, beaten, addicted to drugs, raped, and forced to sell their bodies; and these are only the biographical films. If audiences adopt the traditional male gaze, does this mean that trans people are being asked by filmmakers to identify with tragic characters they don't wish to become?

The way I have read trans moving images over the years has played a role in the how, when, and why of my own coming out narrative. My goal is to use theories of media identification in order to better understand the relationship between my trans self-narrative and trans moving images. Where do I fit in as a trans spectator?

According to Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001), early film spectatorship is based on psychoanalytic models whereby the spectator was not

an actual individual but rather an ideal viewer exclusive of “social, sexual, and racial influences” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 367). Feminist film theorists in the 1970s started to rethink the role of the spectator and through “productive criticism” construed that the film viewer is not a single entity but rather a participant in gendered roles of desire and fetishization (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 75). By the late 1980s and early 1990s, film theory started to take up positions that moved away from the abstraction of the universal spectator towards a more specific spectator group (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 367) such as trans people.

3.2) Stop Gazing At Me

Laura Mulvey’s concern with the placement of women within the structure of Hollywood film narratives led her to formulate her theory of the male gaze (Cook & Bernink, 1999, p. 349). This theory is well situated in second wave feminist concepts of female objectification and sexualization for male viewing pleasure but its foundation in psychoanalysis remains problematic for readings of trans characters and images.

Psychoanalysis helped Mulvey theorize how women are subjugated and controlled by the camera, the film’s protagonist and eventually the spectator but it does not allow for a reading where trans people can disassociate from Freudian concepts of the “crisis of castration” and the deriving of sexual pleasure from fetishistic voyeurism. According to Mulvey’s text, patriarchy informs Hollywood narratives and erases the opportunity for sexual difference (Cook & Bernink, 1999, p. 349).

The unitary positioning of the viewing subject (Bordwell, 1996, p. 8) is problematic for trans people because it assumes that all trans people should identify and receive trans moving images in the same manner. I liken this process to my experience

having to choose a particular series of acceptable responses to psychologists' questions in order to obtain the letters and prescriptions required for my hormone replacement therapy (HRT). Psychoanalysis may have taken a backseat in modern film analysis but my familiarity with its need to pathologize sexual and gender difference still resonates and affects my ability to read trans moving images from a more isolated perspective of spectatorship.

Since the original publication of Mulvey's article, feminist film theory has moved away from a "binary understanding of sexual difference" toward a more open acceptance for the need to negotiate multiple identities, ethnicities and spectatorships (Smelik, 1999, p. 353). New forms of contemporary film theory have reformulated the discourse on subject position to account for identity politics within groups like the LGBT (Bordwell, 1996, p. 4) (Smith M. , 1994, p. 37).

3.3) Theories Of Identification

3.3.1) Identification With All

Why do I feel the need to identify with trans characters and trans moving images? On the surface it looks like this; positive representations of trans people in pop culture make me feel more normal and less marginalized. The truth is it's not that simple. Societal norms are in a constant state of fluctuation, much like the understanding of gender fluidity I advocate for in life and in my research. I should be able to pick and choose the elements about these characters and images that appeal to my understanding of what it means to be trans and discard the rest. My issue with a more nuanced form of identification for reading trans moving images is that – unlike cisgender heterosexual

white men playing the flawed character role in any number of cinematic narratives - I remain sensitive to the implications of trans women in those same roles.

David Bordwell writes how according to most theories, subjectivity in cinema is not a person's individuality or personality but rather the result of socially constructed systems of representation (Bordwell, 1996, p. 6) and how one receives it. These conventions, in conjunction with other theoretical approaches to spectatorship (like Mulvey's gaze), offered "socially acceptable satisfactions through cinematic codes and enunciative practices" (Bordwell, 1996, p. 7). There is no space for personal agency in this framework because the spectator's individuality has already been decided through ideological representations (Bordwell, 1996, p. 8).

Jonathan Cohen (Cohen, 2001) writes about the traditional theoretical models that define identification with media characters and the difficulty collecting empirical data on the assumed consequences of these relationships. His research begins with the commonly understood definitions and distinctions between identification and spectatorship. In the case of spectatorship, the audience watches what happens to the character and those around him/her. The viewer observes the narrative through the eyes of the protagonist but remains distant and distinct from him (Cohen, 2001, p. 251). The spectator does not see himself as the film's character but he does participate in the (male) gaze along with him. Identification is defined as when the audience identifies with a character and they interpret the narrative as if it was happening to them (Cohen, 2001, p. 245). It has historically been considered a process where there is a loss of "self-awareness" that is "temporarily replaced... with heightened emotional and cognitive connections with a character" (Cohen, 2001, p. 251). Identification with fictional characters allows us a

better understanding of social situations from differing realities and perspectives through social alignment. Cohen's challenge to common notions of identification with media characters comes from the problematic collection of data and must be balanced with other more nuanced and specific theories of identification.

John Fiske, drawing from the same straightforward definition of identification as Cohen, suggests an almost intersectional approach to spectatorship where the spectator forms cultural allegiances with (aspects of) the character based on gender, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. (Bordwell, 1996, p. 16). As quoted in Bordwell's text, Fiske writes that the spectator completes "the meaning of character... from his or her knowledge of him – or herself" (Bordwell, 1996, p. 16). My truth is that it's not that simple. I need to better understand identification before I can ultimately claim identification.

3.3.2) Identification With Some

An understanding of the various ways in which I identify – in conjunction with more nuanced definitions of identification - will allow me to read my chosen texts from a perspective that intersects through various systems of oppression, domination and discrimination. Intersectional topics like age, gender, social class, and race ability must be considered in order to better frame these images.

Film theorists like Murray Smith move the work of Mulvey, Cohen, and others forward and away from broad-based definitions of identification. Smith (Smith M. , 1994) argues that theorists like Cohen and Fiske are presenting a much too vague exploration of identification. Smith problematizes the validity of the everyday usage of the term "identification" and whether or not it can be developed into "a systemic explanation of emotional responses to fictional characters" (Smith M. , 1994, p. 34).

Smith reworks the traditional single meaning of identification with film characters into three categories meant to “elicit three levels of imaginative engagement” that together form what he terms a “structure of sympathy” (Smith M. , 1994, p. 35). These levels are *recognition, alignment, and allegiance*.

Recognition is considered the “obvious” trait where the spectator understands certain characters and images because they are familiar with ones found in the real world – at least until the narrative tells us otherwise (Smith M. , 1994, p. 40). Smith defines *Alignment* as the “process” which places the spectator in a position where they are able to access not only the actions of the characters but to what they “know and feel” (Smith M. , 1994, p. 41). This perceptual alignment works with camera and sound and gives the spectator a point of view (POV) that provides greater “access to characters’ states than other devices” (Smith M. , 1994, p. 41). According to Smith, *Allegiance* is “closest” to the definition of identification used by Cohen and Fiske. The spectator’s identification with a character’s moral and/or ideological actions as presented by the narrative in relation to their own experiences and attitudes creates an allegiance with the character (Smith M. , 1994, p. 41). Unlike recognition and alignment, allegiance requires the spectator to evaluate the character and respond emotionally to the character’s actions and situation within the narrative (Smith M. , 1994, p. 42). Smith’s “structure of sympathy” can be used to better frame the construction and use of trans characters as a cinematic trope to justify narrative choices that negatively impact spectator reception.

3.4) Trans (Identity) Identification

The newness of the field of transgender studies allows me the freedom to apply different and more specific theoretical frameworks to my textual readings. The changing

notion of what is considered trans in film, as theorized by Helen Hok-Sze Leung and introduced in my literature review, flips traditional gay and lesbian readings of moving images into one where non-traditional gender performance can have alternate meanings when “viewed through a transgender lens” (Leung, *Trans On Screen*, 2012, p. 183). This transgender lens is a result of how specific spectator groups can choose to read certain queer images as trans rather as gay or lesbian. While Leung’s work focuses on “transing”² queer images in Chinese martial arts and fantasy films such as *Swordsman 2* (Ching Siu-tung, Raymond Lee, 1992) and *Portland Street Blues* (Yip Wai Man, 1998), her theories are applicable to Hollywood and Western texts as well.

Leung suggests three models to reading “trans on screen” that consider how representation is best explored in “relation to or alongside... questions... about how embodied difference is constituted, guarded, permeated, and reconstituted on screen” (Leung, 2012, p. 185). The first model focuses on the cultural meanings of (and associated with images of) gender variant people. These trans characters reflect social anxieties and the pop culture fascination with the before and after of gender change and presentation (Serano, 2006, pp. 53-64). The second model looks at trans as a form of relationality where differing forms of gender and embodiment (usually between queer-identified people) can be transformed through relationships to/with each other such as “desire, love, and friendship” (Leung, 2012, p. 186). This model works with intersections of gender and sexuality and is a doorway to discourse on the erasure of gay and lesbian trans people from trans moving images in order to maintain heteronormative patriarchal

² According to Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, “*Transing* is a practice that takes place within, as well as across or between gendered spaces. It is a practice that assembles gender into contingent structures of association with other attributes of bodily being, and that allows for their reassembly” (Leung, *Trans On Screen*, 2012, p. 185).

structures. The third model works with the “broad notion” of body modification “practices like piercings, branding, tattooing, and cosmetic surgery in addition to sex reassignment surgeries” (Leung, 2012, p. 187). This model focuses on locating transness through body modification rather than through issues of identity and relationality as in the first two interpretive models (Leung, 2012, pp. 186-187). This model can be applied to non-trans actors who – through various methods of modification – seek to change their bodies to better create what they consider to be an appropriate trans moving image.

3.5) Conclusion

Theories of the gaze and “to-be-looked-at-ness”, to use Laura Mulvey’s term for taking pleasure in being looked at (exhibitionism)³, have moved from traditional and psychological models to ones that are more inclusive of trans embodiment of both object (on-screen) moving images and spectator subjects. By using models of identification that allow for a more nuanced unpacking of trans moving images, I create a framework that skips past the dominant hegemonic discourses into readings where the unitary spectator becomes the trans viewer.

³ It is interesting to note how I took pleasure in being “looked at” when I would visit nightclubs dressed *en-femme* (this is the polite way to say cross dressed) before I transitioned. The concept of to-be-looked-at-ness suggests that one takes pleasure in being gazed at. I did then because I believed it validated my femininity. I do not anymore.

Chapter 4: Me, Myself, and Trans

Scene: The Home Office, Hi-Rise Apartment, June 2011.

The trans woman has returned to school and is hard at work on her latest research paper. She scours the Internet for information concerning the portrayal of trans people in film and television. She comes across a listing for well-known trans-activist Andrea James on the Internet Movie Database. James and her business partner at Stealth Productions, Calpernia Addams (the subject of the critically acclaimed film *Soldier's Girl*), have self-produced their own film featuring trans characters. The movie is called *Transproofed* (2009) and the story line is described as follows: "Friends Ava and Joyce race to hide hints that Ava is transsexual before her unaware date arrives at her over-the-top apartment (The Internet Movie Database, 2009)."

The trans woman lowers her head and sighs.

Introduction

Trans moving images were only a part of what I call my "trans awareness experience" of the late 1990s and early 2000s. This experience also consisted of navigating Internet forums in search of other transminded individuals whom I could share my feelings with. Many of the people I chatted with online would be defined by the DSM⁴ as transvestic disorder – the problematic term that suggests cross dressing for sexual arousal – rather than the gender dysphoric people I was hoping to engage with. Fortunately, trans people were beginning to share their stories in greater numbers by publishing memoirs and other trans self-help books so I was able to turn to other sources of information. Some of these works are now considered foundational pieces in the field of trans studies such as Jan Morris' *Conundrum* (1974), Kate Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw*

⁴ "Over a period of at least 6 months, recurrent and intense sexual arousal from cross-dressing, as manifested by fantasies, urges, or behaviors" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p.337-338).

(1995), and Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993), while others – like Donna Rose's *Wrapped In Blue: A Journey of Discovery* (2006) and Calpernia Addams' *Mark 949: A Life Shaped by God, Gender and Force of Will* (2003) - transformed their authors into (trans) celebrities.

The varying narrative styles of trans-related texts and the stories they pass on to others in the community are a form of trans activism (Beemyn, 2014, p. 521) as well as a useful qualitative research tool.

4.1) Storytelling

Storytelling has been used as a method to pass down information from one generation to another so that we may learn from the past in order to help create a better path towards the future (Smith L. T., 1999, p. 146). Trans artist and educator Rebecca Kling shares the importance of storytelling as activism in a short autoethnographic piece she wrote for the educational text *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves* (Erickson-Schroth, 2014). Kling writes that by sharing stories of her life as a trans woman, she combats “tales laid out in film and television of transgender characters labeled as “freaks” and “perverts”” (p. 578). Kling’s art humanizes her existence as a trans person and according to her makes it more difficult for others to dehumanize her, which she writes “is the core purpose of art, to call us to remember our common humanity” (p. 578).

As a member of three historically marginalized communities – I’m Jewish, trans, and gay - storytelling plays a very important role in my development as an individual. Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes about “re-membering in terms of connecting bodies with place and experience” (Smith L. T., 1999, p. 147). In this respect, my Jewish background has allowed me to hear directly from survivors of the Holocaust.

My lesbian identity has allowed me to hear directly from members of the gay community who championed our rights back in the 1960s. And my trans identity has allowed me to locate myself directly in the middle a new (visible) struggle; a position where I feel my research can open doors and create new forms of facilitation towards a greater understanding of what it means to be trans.

4.2) Autoethnography

“Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 1). It is where the “memoirist and the academic collide” to “blur the usual distinctions between self and other” (Denzin & Lincoln, *The Qualitative Inquiry Reader*, 2002, p. 71). Autoethnography allows for a certain amount of creativity because it helps with the unpacking of personal narratives through poetry, photography, short stories, fiction, personal essays (p. 71), and in this case an analysis of trans moving images on issues of identification.

In their piece *Autoethnography Is Queer* (2008), Tony E. Adams and Stacy Holman Jones string together some scholarly definitions of autoethnography in order to position it as a “hinge” that relies on the “push and pull between analysis and evocation, personal experience and larger social, cultural, and political concerns” (p. 374).

According to Arthur P. Bochner (from the same article), autoethnography is used to “extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experience as it was lived” (p. 374).

With this in mind, I decided that my own lived experience was fodder enough to get the conversation started (Crawley, 2012, p. 9). It was a place where I could regale

stories of how trans moving images affected my self-esteem, internalized my own transphobic thoughts, and eventually pushed me out of the closet when I realized that I was the one holding the door closed. Norman K. Denzin, a scholar who specializes in qualitative research, wrote that autoethnography “enacts a way of seeing and being [that] challenges, contests, or endorses the official, hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the other” (p. 375). I never realized that I was playing into the “hegemonic ways of seeing” trans people. Autoethnography allows me to close doors, open doors, and explode doors as I tell my story.

Does my story mean more than the next trans persons’? No. It does not. Autoethnography is not simply about compiling a ‘greatest hits’ of my more aggravating ‘trans on film’ memories. It is about situating myself as researcher to “consider ways others may have experienced similar” narratives (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 3). Since transgender studies is an emerging field in the academy without any established methodologies (Ryan J. R., 2009, p. 19), autoethnographic methods applied to film analysis and theories of identification is a productive method for establishing the relationship between moving images and personal trans narratives. It allows trans people to be researcher and not simply the research.

Social theorist Sara L. Crawley’s extensive literature review on the history of autoethnography (Crawley, 2012) situates my research methods somewhere between evocative autoethnography and performance autoethnography. *Evocative autoethnography*, according to Crawley (by way of Carolyn Ellis), “extends ethnography” into the autobiographical in order to “evoke the feeling of lived emotional experience from the reader” (Crawley, 2012, p. 11). Denzin writes that *performance*

autoethnography must be “more than cathartic; it must be political, moving people to action and reflection” (Denzin, 2000b, p.905)” (Crawley, 2012, p. 14). Different forms of autoethnography, as stated by Crawley, overlap and tend to draw criticism with respect to the methods’ legitimacy as a form of analytic qualitative research rather than a form of “self-absorbed” creative writing (Crawley, 2012, pp. 12, 15). I agree with Crawley that autoethnography – whether evocative, analytic, or performance - remains the most effective way to investigate issues that affect the LGBT because the researcher can, through her lived experience, theorize “bodies, identities, sexualities, and subjectivities” in a manner that straddles both the academic and the activist (Crawley, 2012, p. 13).

I use a form of autoethnography referred to as “layered text”. This style of writing, created by Carol Rambo Ronai, allows the researcher to layer different styles and genres of text “one on top of the other, with transitions marked” by different types of signifiers like text fonts or “typographic signals-symbols” (Denzin & Lincoln, *The Qualitative Inquiry Reader*, 2002, p. 72). Layered text allows my readers to get closer to my research.

Through storytelling and autoethnography, it is my intention is to allow the reader to share in my trans experience even if it may be unfamiliar to them. Perhaps in being able to “feel” my writing, as Crawley states, readers will be able to journey to their own painful places, seek catharsis of their own, or open their hearts to a deeper understanding on the effects of marginalization (Crawley, 2012, p. 11) through problematic representations.

Autoethnography provides me with a research tool removed from the current patriarchal structure of the academy that can foster less oppressive ways of analyzing

trans film. My hope is that this thesis, while limited in scope, will contribute to new ways of producing knowledge on the effects of trans moving images on trans people.

4.3) Pseudo Scripts and A Chosen Few (Trans Moving Images)

Using my subjective experience as qualitative data, my thesis contains short personal narratives that help unpack the effect that trans moving images have had on my agency over the years. These creative pseudo film scripts, along with a close reading of trans moving images from two films and (specific scenes from) one serialized program, were chosen because they represent the neutral, the negative, and the positive with respect to affect on my agency.

My creative pseudo scripts provide insight into points in my life where my transness was starting to rear its head and question the authenticity of the identity I was living at the time. I write about moments that I recall with great clarity from my teenage years up until my coming-out and eventual return to school after a 20-year absence. Each of the scripts – which I have placed throughout this thesis - signifies a defining moment in my identification with trans imagery and pop culture representation.

Whereas my pseudo scripts use trans moving images from as far back as the 1980s, my corpus for this thesis only dates back as far as 2001. I wanted to keep my thesis current and accessible so that (trans) readers would be familiar with the filmic texts – if only in name. The trans moving images that form my corpus are from *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), and *Transparent* (2014).

As of this writing: *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* has been written about in academic papers and scholarly journals. *Transparent* is still too fresh to be cited in an academic context. For the moment, *Dallas Buyers Club* has not had much academic exposure other

than in medical journals that reference its story about HIV/AIDS activism. Typical of the medical establishment, the transness of Rayon is simply brushed off as her being a “drag queen” in order to focus on a critique of an “offbeat film with many merits” about the hard lessons learned by the establishment in the early days of the AIDS epidemic (Mullard, 2014). The various types of trans images in my corpus contain elements of intersectionality along lines of beauty, age, social class and ethnicity. They do not intersect with race, as all of the characters can be read as white. How these elements play out during the films’ narratives and how they reflect back on my trans narrative is a major part of my research.

4.4) My Trans CORPus

4.4.1) Hedwig and the Angry Inch

Hedwig and the Angry Inch is an Off-Broadway rock musical written by John Cameron Mitchell and Stephen Trask, starring Mitchell in the title role. The movie version of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* was filmed in Toronto and featured Mitchell – once again – in the dual role of actor and director.

Hedwig is the story of Hansel, an East-German boy who undergoes a botched sex-change operation (hence the angry inch) in order to marry his much older American military boyfriend and escape to the west. When she arrives in America, her husband dumps her for a younger man. Hedwig, sad and alone and living in a trailer park, meets Tommy. Together they write beautiful music together. Tommy, unable to deal with Hedwig’s angry inch, steals their songs and goes on to become a famous rock star. Bitter

and filled with anger and love towards Tommy, Hedwig heads out on a tour of her own in order to reclaim her songs and find her lost love.

Hedwig is an important part of my corpus because of the role it played in my own narrative and the fact that it's not really a trans film even though it is always regarded as such by mainstream (not queer) audiences. Hedwig's impact as a transgender pop culture icon has been popularized by an amazing set of songs and recently by Neil Patrick Harris - an actor commonly associated with a situation comedy (*How I Met Your Mother*) and a childhood drama where he played a 16-year old doctor (Doogie Howser, M.D.). What most people don't know about Hedwig is that her story owes a great debt to mythmaking, in this case Plato's Symposium by way of Freud.

My thesis will explore the troubled importance of Hedwig as part of the trans film canon and how the timelessness of the film's music and its (queer) story parallel my coming out narrative.

4.4.2) Dallas Buyers Club

Dallas Buyers Club (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2013) straddles the line between independent film and Hollywood because the showy roles contained in the film were most likely written to attract big name actors in order to secure financing. Director Jean-Marc Vallée's critical darling stars Matthew McConaughey in the lead as Ron Woodroof - an HIV/AIDS-infected electrician and con-artist - and sometime actor/fulltime rock star Jared Leto as Rayon - a "trans woman" also suffering from HIV/AIDS.

Unlike past cinematic representations that have been deemed problematic by trans activists and queer scholars, *Dallas Buyers Club* comes at a time when social media plays an integral part in challenging the problematic nature of queering characters for mass

consumption. Representations of trans peoples' lived experience need to be put front and center in a way that produces new knowledge and portrayals/storylines rather than simply reproducing problematic stereotypes. Through a collection of reviews and interviews from mainstream and queer sources regarding the film, my research will elaborate on how the inclusion of a gender variant character as representative of the entire LGBT community and the praise given to cis-gender actors like Jared Leto's may be harmful rather than helpful to trans communities. It will be argued how the transing of *Dallas Buyers Club*, along with the assumption that Rayon is intended to be trans rather than a gay man in drag, erases my trans lived-experience and replaces it with what feminist scholar Judith Butler calls "high het entertainment" where "homophobia and homosexual panic are negotiated" (Butler, 1993, pp. 124-125). Stereotypical representations of trans people can affect the coming out narratives of trans people in a variety of ways. The constant barrage of images where the everyday life of the trans character is stamped with situations of social stigma like prostitution, drug use, and sexual abuse is tiring. While psychological and physical violence are definitely a part of some trans peoples' lives, there are other representational options.

4.4.3) Transparent

The third set of images in my corpus is not from a film but from an online streaming service provided by retail giant Amazon. *Transparent* (Jill Soloway, 2014) is the story of a family patriarch who comes out as a trans woman to his three adult children. Jill Soloway, the show's creator and director used her own life experience – her father came out as a trans woman – to tell a story she felt had not been told before (Collier, 2014). Soloway has received some criticism from those opposed to her hiring a

cis-gender male actor for the lead role, but *Transparent* is very much a trans program in that she has trans consultants working with the script writers. Soloway also has 20 trans people working as crew and cast, and another 60 working as extras (Ehrhardt, 2014).

Transparent comes at a time in my life when my own hard earned self-confidence allows me to render and identify with many aspects of the program's trans images without experiencing the sadness that may have engulfed me early in my transition. Maura, the subject of *Transparent*'s coming out narrative, may be older than I am but she comes with the same Jewish cultural baggage that I do. I intend to examine images from *Transparent* that intersect my own experience with transness, Jewishness, and late-life transition.

Chapter 5: TRANalySis

Introduction

This thesis is being written at a historic time for trans people. At least that is what I have been reading as I spend hours researching articles from both scholarly and mass media sources. I have read about how trans rights are the new civil rights struggle. I have read all about the amazing true-to-life portrayals of the trans experience on the silver screen while listening to cis gender actors sympathize with ‘normal’ women on the hardships of attaining the female beauty standard as defined by Gillette and Lever Brothers. What I have not read enough about in mainstream media is how this historic moment is impacting the usually silenced trans voice in – as Scottish alternative band Franz Ferdinand called it - the dark of the matinee.

5.1) Hedwig And The Angry Inch (John Cameron Mitchell, 2001)

Scene: AMC Theaters, Downtown Montreal, July 2001.

The young heterosexual couple has been anticipating this movie since they first spotted the word *transsexual* in the film’s description in the local paper. The young man recently came out to his girlfriend about his need to cross dress and she was understanding - if not quite comfortable with it. The screening of the movie coincides with Montréal’s LGBT cultural festival Divers/Cité and there are many members of the gay community in the audience. The film, *Hedwig and The Angry Inch* (John Cameron Mitchell, 2001), is at times hilarious, intimate, touching, sad, and triumphant. The glam rock songs that the character of Hedwig uses to share her story are so powerful that the young couple seeks out the film’s soundtrack as soon as the movie lets out. While they agree on the music, they don’t entirely agree on whether or not Hedwig is indeed transsexual.

The first time I saw *Hedwig and The Angry Inch*, I was in a cisgender heterosexual relationship. I was happy to have a partner who was open to viewing LGBT films – more so than her initial tolerance for my cross dressing proclivities. In turn, I was happy to view (and label) any moving images with a cross dressing character as transsexual. I believe this early recognition and labeling of Hedwig as trans allowed me to assume a spectator position removed from the “normal” people in the cinema that day. Hedwig was trans enough for me, and more importantly, she was trans enough for pop culture. Repeat viewings of the film dot my transition trajectory from 2001 until the present and shifted my alignment with the character and Mitchell’s articulation of gender variance and the mainstream reception of Hedwig as trans.

In order to better demonstrate my relationship with the trans moving images in *Hedwig and The Angry Inch*, I have divided my analysis into two sections. The first section looks at the character of Hedwig Robinson (née Schmidt) through the film’s narrative. I explore two scenes in particular. The first scene drives the narrative forward while the second scene brings the film to its climax. Both scenes unpack various moving images of gender and sexuality. This section also touches on the discourse surrounding the transness of Hedwig and its use as a cinematic trope. Using these scenes as a base, the second section discusses the importance that music plays in the film and how it affected my trans reading of the film.

5.1.1) Make up your mind already: The Origin of Love or The Origin of Hedwig

Hedwig and The Angry Inch contains its fair share of showstoppers, but it is the second song of the film - *The Origin Of Love* - that sets up the film’s themes of love, identity, and sexuality. It is, in effect, the origin of Hedwig told through song, animation,

and Greek philosophy. The origin of how “some slip of a girlyboy from East Berlin” became the “internationally ignored song stylist” (Mitchell & Trask, *Hedwig and The Angry Inch*, 2003, p. 9) known as Hedwig.

The scene begins with Hedwig and her band (The Angry Inch) holding court at the local Bildgewaters restaurant across the parking lot from former lover, and now famous rock star, Tommy Gnosis’ current stadium tour. As Gnosis is heard thanking his fans for all the inspiration that allowed him to create his music, a neglected and resentful Hedwig shares her story with a sparse and disinterested crowd of diners.

As a series of animations⁵ depicting little Hansel in various sleeping positions flicker across the screen, a heavily made-up Hedwig tells of how “so many people touched” her on her way to the stage “tonight” that she can’t remember who touched her the most. She recounts: “Was it my father... the American G.I.? Could it have been my East German mother? No, when she touched me it was usually by accident” (Mitchell & Trask, *Hedwig and The Angry Inch*, 2003, p. 10). The music begins as Hedwig shares a bedtime story her mother once sung to her, *The Origin Of Love*. Hedwig sings while staring off in the distance towards what can only be imagined as her life that should have been. Mitchell plays with make-up techniques and dramatic lighting to highlight Hedwig’s straddling “the great divide” of the gender binary. This makes it difficult for viewers to read the character as female, male, or somewhere in between. The song is a ballad based on Aristophanes’ origin of love from Plato’s *Symposium* (Jones, 2006, p. 453) that details how humans were originally three sexes - Children of The Sun (male/male), Children of The Moon (male/female) and Children of The Earth

⁵ Emily Hubley was responsible for the film’s animation. Links to her work on *Hedwig and The Angry Inch* can be found at www.emilyhubley.com

(female/female) - until we angered the gods and they separated us with their lightning (like scissors, according to Hedwig). We have been seeking out our other halves ever since.

As the song comes to a close, the scene transitions from Bildgewaters to Hedwig in bed with her husband Yitzhak (played by cis gender female actor Miriam Shore). The camera slowly pans down Hedwig's body. She is lying on her side, spooning her husband. The sheets are strategically placed but reveal a tattoo on Hedwig's outer thigh. The image is of a face split in two. Through voiceover narration, Hedwig realizes that she must find her other half but questions what her other half looks like and whether she is looking for a he or a she. She wonders if "he got the looks, the luck, the love" (Mitchell & Trask, *Hedwig and The Angry Inch*, 2003, pp. 14,15). Were they forcibly separated? Did he run off with the "good stuff" or did Hedwig? While Hedwig ponders her other half, I ponder her transness.

The discourse surrounding the transness of Hedwig has been in a state of flux since the film was first released to mainstream and LGBT critical acclaim in 2001. Mainstream media continues to consider her transsexual while LGBT and scholarly readings of the text vacillate depending on who is doing the writing (Sandell, 2010, p. 232). The film's narrative suggests that Hedwig identifies with the Children Of The Moon (the androgynous m/f) rather than the Children Of The Sun (man). Hedwig is consistently referred to as transsexual and female pronouns are attributed to her throughout the film.

Jordy Jones, in her piece *Gender Without Genitals: Hedwig's Six Inches* (Jones, 2006), writes that the character of Hedwig is not a transgender woman. She is an "overt

citation of a transsexual woman” (Jones, 2006, p. 450). Jones assesses Mitchell’s portrayal as neither accurate to “trans or drag subjectivities” but rather “a male homosexual negotiation of transsexual panic” through the “idiom of drag” (Jones, 2006, p. 450). While I tend to agree with many queer problematizations of Hedwig, I believe the line between drag and trans used to be thinner than Jones and other academics have suggested. I spent many nights at Montréal’s local drag bar, Café Cleopatra⁶, as part of a large group of male to female (MTF) gender performers – for lack of a better umbrella term. Some of us were weekend warriors who only dressed en-femme part-time, some were gay men who dragged it up for fun, and some were trans and performed at the club as a means to pay for their transition. Is Hedwig trans because her sex change operation was botched or is she a homosexual male performing drag because her sex change operation was botched?

Transsexuality in *Hedwig and The Angry Inch* is used as a device by the filmmaker to “confront the horror and fascination of phallic lack, to visit both sides of the perceived binary gender divide, and to emerge psychically transformed yet physically intact” (Jones, 2006, p. 450). Hansel, unlike most trans people, never expresses any desire to transition. Hansel only transitions from male to female because it is the only way he can be free of the oppression he is likely to face as a gay boy if he remains in Communist East Berlin.

To make matters worse, the narrative uses childhood trauma (sex abuse/rape) to justify the splitting of Hansel between her male and female halves. According to Jones, the rape by his father sends Hansel on his journey to discover his other half (Jones, 2006,

⁶ Viviane Namaste wrote extensively on the links between Montréal’s historic drag scene and the Québec Civil Code’s harsh treatment of trans people (Namaste, *C’était du spectacle!*, 2005).

p. 453). This trope perpetuates the idea that LGBT people in general – and trans people in particular - are created through trauma and can only be healed through medical intervention. If we read Hedwig as trans, then we are reading her through the troubling lens of “negative affect”- a character in constant distress and discomfort due to her incomplete “dysphoric body” (Keegan, 2003). As a trans woman, I prefer to read her as a gay male performing drag. It hurts me less⁷.

The “what went wrong” narrative that is commonly heard with respect to homosexual texts, is “now present in trans narratives” (Jones, 2006, p. 452) but Hedwig also introduces transnational ways of seeing (Sandell, 2010) that I must acknowledge as a Jewish person who had family members escape persecution in Europe and Russia only to rediscover it here in Canada. That being said, the fact that Hedwig hails from East Berlin and that her husband Yitzhak is both Jewish and an immigrant is not lost on me. Both characters may be queer but that is not reason enough for them to really like each other. Their marriage is one of convenience. They are brought together by a need to be united – not under a trans or queer umbrella – but under one of American nationality. Hedwig torments Yitzhak, referencing both his illegal immigrant status and Hitler’s Germany (Mitchell & Trask, *Hedwig and The Angry Inch*, 2003, pp. 15, 25). Yitzhak must choose between his glamorous life as “Krystal Nacht... the Last Jewess in the Balkans” (Mitchell & Trask, *Hedwig and The Angry Inch*, 2003, p. 25) and the supposed freedom that America offers while trapped behind the institutional bars of transphobia. She makes Yitzhak the same offer that Luther made to her: “to walk away you gotta leave something

⁷ The gay male drag performers that befriended me at Café Cleopatra when I needed an outlet for my femininity were always quite clear about their gender identity and their sexuality. They knew how one played into the other and they used this to attract “desirable” straight – and usually married – men at the club. The deception narrative was part of the challenge for them.

behind” (Mitchell & Trask, *Hedwig and The Angry Inch*, 2003, pp. 19, 25). Yitzhak – much in the way that my Jewish ancestors were forced to change their identities - must give up his own dreams of gender variance in order to join Hedwig in America (Mitchell & Trask, *Hedwig and The Angry Inch*, 2003, p. 25). As a Jewish trans woman, I prefer to read him as trans. It hurts me less.

The narrative insinuates that Hedwig hates and resents her differently gendered body. She blames the loss of her other half on her angry inch yet the film never discusses how it performs sexually other than one scene in which Hedwig fucks⁸ her husband in the same way that her father abused her (11m26s). It is the reproduction of patriarchal abuse. Hedwig’s lack of understanding of sex, gender and sexuality allows her to torment her husband in the same way that society has tormented her. Sex and love are distinct. Sex is violent.

Hedwig’s origin doesn’t reach its climax until the final song of the piece, *Midnight Radio*. While the scene leading up to *The Origin Of Love* details Hansel’s fascination with the “crypto homo-rockers” of the seventies like David Bowie, Iggy Pop and Lou Reed (Mitchell & Trask, *Hedwig and The Angry Inch*, 2003, p. 11). *Midnight Radio* brings her story full circle as she hands her mantle (in this case, her wig) over to her long suffering husband Yitzhak and takes her place amongst the great female rockers of all time; Patti Smith, Tina Turner, Yoko Ono, Nona Hendrix, and Velvet Underground collaborator and Andy Warhol muse, Nico.

Hedwig stands silent in front of her band, having shed her feminine attire in the punk rock soul baring rage of *Exquisite Corpse*. She is naked except for her tight black

⁸ I use this word because Hedwig does not “make love” to Yitzhak nor does she “have sex” with him. Their form of intercourse is a reproduction of violence.

shorts. Her once gender deviant body is revealed in its acceptable masculine form. She looks around at The Angry Inch, all dressed in white. Hedwig reaches down and picks up her discarded wig while Yitzhak looks on with disgust and sadness. She extends her arm, handing the wig over to her husband. He assumes that she wants his help placing it back on his head. As Yitzhak looks down longingly at the wig, Hedwig gestures that the wig is not meant for her but for Yitzhak. She raises her hand towards the air as Yitzhak raises his. Their hands touch. Hedwig gently spins her husband in a gesture of love and recognition that signifies both the end of her quest for her other half and the beginning of his. The scene ends with Yitzhak transformed into the beautiful woman he always dreamt he was. Hedwig stumbles into the alleyway outside of Bildgewaters. S/he is naked. The Children Of The Sun have become whole again.

5.1.2) Deny Me and Be Doomed: Hedwig's Inch Fits In Your Pocket

Hedwig and The Angry Inch is a love story about finding your other half. Not necessarily your better half. The trans moving images in Hedwig appealed to me in the sense that they represented the masquerade – and struggle - between the male and female identities that I was living. The lack of choice demonstrated by Hansel when it came to having a sex change was mirrored by my lack of choice in not being able to have one. The scrawl of animation that appears just before the final verse of *The Origin Of Love* resonates with me more than any of the actual trans images in the film; “Deny me and be doomed” (16m30s).

A Google search on the phrase “deny me and be doomed” (along with the word Hedwig) brings up 1500+ results, many of which thank Mitchell for coming up with a phrase so easily open to interpretation by those who feel marginalized. The phrase - while

not specifically trans-related - spoke to my current self. Never mind Hedwig, I needed to find my other half.

Hedwig and The Angry Inch entered my life when I believed that any attempt to climb over the gender fence would result with me landing on my head. I recognized images of blurred gender as a positive step in the long process of transition but this film allowed me to experience something different from the other trans moving images I had seen. My reception as a (closeted) trans spectator did not fit with my usual reading of film texts because Hedwig – I discovered - was portable. Thanks to a musical score written by Stephen Trask – a gay glam and punk rocker in his own right – I could take the images from Hedwig along with me as I travelled from place to place in my drab male life. With *Hedwig and The Angry Inch* playing in my car CD player or on my Discman, my male commute was bearable.

I convinced myself that I was not in denial of my transness because the portability of these trans moving images afforded me the opportunity to take my internalized transness (or was it transphobia?) with me when the idea of outward expression terrified me. Like Hedwig, it was my choice to take the “wig down from the shelf” (Mitchell & Trask, 2003, pp. 22-23). Or was it? Was I accessing the music as a method to suppress my emotions rather than to let them rage like Hedwig does? My allegiance to the character of Hedwig could not be found in moral or ideological actions, as Smith (1994) suggests, but in her routine of gender performance. It was about the use of make-up and clothing to conceal one’s birth gender and images of Hedwig’s feminized male form that attracted me to the character. I was pre-occupied with the pop cultural fascination of “before and after” in trans moving images rather than the more important narrative of

transnational gender and sexual transgression. The trans moving images in the film were familiar to me because my comprehension of trans was limited to dressing up en-femme and going out to drag clubs. That changed in 2006 when my world and Hedwig's world started to move in different directions. As I came out the closet, Hedwig moved back in.

My untransing of *Hedwig and The Angry Inch* started as I finally admitted I was trans and that I needed to do something about it. I had been listening to the soundtrack for five years but my recall of the images and what they meant to me started to shift. I didn't recognize Hedwig in the same way but – as a spectator - I was finally able to align myself with her. I believe this has more to do with a soundtrack that not only touched my ears but represented part of my identity. The style of music, a mix of punk and glam that name-checks many of my own music idols, allowed me to steamroll over aspects of Hedwig (the character) that I no longer hold allegiance to. Like the mainstream viewer seeing the film through the male gaze, I was transing *Hedwig and The Angry Inch* from my spectator position in the closet; as an out member of the LGBT community, I no longer feel the need to.

My trans-self ponders Hedwig from a different position. Does she complicate common definitions of what is trans (and make things harder for trans people) because she chooses gender rather than gender choosing her? Does a gay boy submitting to a sex change make him trans?

Heteronormative cisgender society's continued transing of *Hedwig and The Angry Inch* is now rooted in who plays Hedwig as opposed to who is Hedwig. The Broadway production of Hedwig starring out actor Neil Patrick Harris won him a Tony Award for "Best Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role in a Musical" (Variety Staff, 2014) and

the original Broadway soundtrack charted on Billboard. This success has led to a rotation of actors – gay and straight - taking the wig down off the shelf, including John Cameron Mitchell. *Hedwig and The Angry Inch* – in effect - has been re-contextualized by the trans community, claimed by the queer community and discovered by the hetero cisgender community (Baran, 2015). Deny Hedwig and be doomed.

5.2) Dallas Buyers Club (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2013)

Scene: Hotel Room, Cambridge, MA, Spring 2015.

The trans woman sits down on the sofa to begin watching *Dallas Buyers Club* for the second time. Her partner joins her once the film has already started. They experience the film differently than they did the first time. The underlying tragedy of the early years of the AIDS epidemic hits particularly hard this time, as a well loved family member succumbed to the disease a few years ago. The couple still view the character of Rayon, a trans woman, as a harmful trope but this time they are able to separate the actor's performance from the script. Later that night, the trans woman turns to her partner and wonders out loud: "Maybe Rayon isn't trans after all".

The first time I saw *Dallas Buyers Club* I was completing my Certificate in Women's Studies at the Simone de Beauvoir Institute in Montréal. My reading of its trans moving images was influenced by the feminist research I had been conducting as well as by my experience negotiating a society fearful of gender transgression. I was upset and angry at the mainstream praise that Jared Leto was receiving for his portrayal of Rayon, while actual trans people were still being targeted by "bathroom bills" that depicted us as sexual predators just for peeing. Why is it okay for cisgender people to play at being trans while trans people cannot live as trans?

In order to better demonstrate my relationship with the trans moving images in *Dallas Buyers Club*, I have divided my analysis into three sections. The first section

frames the film through the use of transphobic and homophobic language directed at Rayon to provide comic relief to the audience despite her tragic circumstance. It also considers issues of transing and how they may apply to Rayon. The second section focuses on the media response to the film – and Jared Leto’s Rayon in particular - by mainstream and queer sources. In the third section, I propose an untransing of *Dallas Buyers Club* where Rayon can be read as a drag queen as a form of harm reduction to the trans community.

5.2.1) Sticks and Stones: This is what they are selling

Dallas Buyers Club is a (fictionalized) film about (real-life) Ron Woodroof, a heterosexual cisgender male who contracted HIV-AIDS in the early 1980s. Rather than accept his doctor’s prognosis that he has thirty days left to live, Woodroof sets out to explore other avenues to prolong his life. What he discovers are foreign medications and supplements that have yet to receive the American Federal Drug Administration’s (FDA) seal of approval but that prove more effective in easing the pain of people living with AIDS than the untested drug AZT. Woodroof, an electrician by trade, finds ways to work around the legal system so that he can import the medications to save his own life, make some money, and piss off a government that would rather see (mostly gay) Americans die of AIDS than question its ties to Big Pharma. Woodruff finds a business partner in Rayon, a trans woman suffering from AIDS, who is well connected with the LGBT community. Rayon offers Ron the ability to grow his business within a community that he despises. Along the way, Ron becomes sympathetic towards AIDS-related homophobia. At least that is what it looks like on the surface. Shift your sympathy from Ron to Rayon and the film takes on a different meaning.

“Honey, you don’t have the slightest chance.” The hospital curtain that separates the bed between Ron and his roommate swishes across the frame and a delicate figure makes her way to the foot of his bed. “I’m Rayon”. “Congratulations”, responds Ron, “Now fuck off and go back to your bed” (Borten & Wallack, 2012, p. 24). Rayon’s drag queen introduction to Ron and the audience is tempered by her quick wit and ability to play – and win – at cards. Ron’s reaction to (his loss at cards and) her kindness is filled with homophobic comments that never lessen even as their business relationship and friendship continues to grow. For example, a scene at a supermarket has Ron defending Rayon by forcing his homophobic former friend T.J. to shake “his” hand after referring to her as a “faggot” (Borten & Wallack, 2012, p. 47). Rayon is never given agency over her gender. She provides comic relief not through her wit but rather by being on the receiving end of Ron’s unnecessary transphobic slurs that pepper the film

I understand that Ron Woodruff is not written as a sympathetic protagonist but the male gaze suggests that the audience is supposed to navigate the film’s narrative through him. I feel that this creates a problematic relationship between spectator and screen object because Ron’s homophobia and transphobia can read in different ways. For example, some could justify it because he is “helping” LGBT people suffering with HIV-AIDS through his buyers club. On the other hand, It could also be argued that Ron forces spectators to have a direct access to homophobia and transphobia that could positively impact their recognition of the hurt that this language causes Rayon and the other LGBT characters in the film.

I had considered analyzing *Dallas Buyers Club* through the use of specific moving images that feature transphobic moments, but I decided it might be more

powerful to quote some of the words rather than describe the images. “Get the fuck outta here, whatever you are” (p. 24). “I'da figured you for queens” (p. 24). “I’ma use this gun to give you the sex change you been hopin' for” (p. 43). “Tinkerbell” (pp. 35, 39). “Do not use the word “we”. Now you wanna put your apron on and fly around on your broom, be my guest” (p. 41). “Rayon, I swear, God sure was dressin’ the wrong doll when he blessed you with a pair of balls” (p. 60). “Stop starin’ at her tits, you're startin’ to look normal” (p. 71). Even Ron’s compliments are steeped in transphobia.

The language used in *Dallas Buyers Club* impacts me more than the image of an emaciated and heavily made-up Rayon asking Dr. Saks if her blouse is too revealing (Borten & Wallack, 2012, p. 22). My identification with Rayon did change upon multiple viewings of the film. Initial revulsion at my recognition of yet another stereotypical portrayal of a trans woman by a cisgender actor softened when I realized that Rayon was not meant to represent my experience. While I did recognize the character as someone I would have known back when I frequented Café Cleopatra, she was only one variation of a trans woman. Unfortunately, I feel that she is one variation of a drug-addicted sex worker trans woman too many. There have been too many Rayons in Hollywood cinema over the years. Not all of them had speaking parts, but have we not seen enough of this archetype?

Perhaps I am reading the trans moving images in *Dallas Buyers Club* incorrectly? Am I guilty of transing Rayon to further my own gender politics? I have been considering the discourse surrounding Rayon’s perceived transness as I research and analyze the film and its script. The language used in the film implies the viewer to see Rayon not as trans but as a gay man in drag.

According to the script, Rayon's look is inspired by glam rock tragedy Marc Bolan of T.Rex (Borten & Wallack, 2012, p. 62). Rayon hangs pictures of Bolan on the wall of her office at the motel. She also hangs them on Ron's office wall in what appears to be an attempt to expand Ron's horizons (Borten & Wallack, 2012, p. 58B). Ron's later attempt at masturbation is interrupted when he discovers Bolan's photo amongst his wall of pin-up girls (Borten & Wallack, 2012, p. 65). Bolan was a bisexual gender-bender but that was all in the name of rock n' roll and not gender transition.

Rayon is referred to by masculine pronouns throughout the film, even by those who are closest to her like Dr. Saks. I had hoped that the film would contextualize current trans political issues into its narrative because I knew that the high profile nature of the film would attract media attention to gender transition.

In the end, the most startling image of Rayon is not her "pretty" AIDS ravaged body, as she lies dying on a hospital bed, but the tragic figure she cuts – a few scenes earlier - in a man's suit, with no make-up, and her hair slicked back. She looks like the man she has gone to meet - to plead with for help - her banker father. True sadness is found in the inauthenticity of conformity.

5.2.2) Mainstreaming Trans: Jared Leto is not in my club

*Dallas Buyers Club*⁹ is a work of cinematic storytelling but it is based on true events and on an individual who lived with, and eventually died from AIDS. With this

⁹ For the purpose of my literature review, I divided the articles into categories of film reviews, critiques, and *making-ofs*. Film reviews have been gathered from respected (heteronormative) mainstream sources like The Guardian, The Washington Post, and The New York Times. I have been careful in my selection so that the articles represent the periodicals that they are written for and are not part of news agencies like Reuters or the Associated Press. I made this decision so that location may be considered when exploring opinions and subjectivities of the writers. I was also aware of the overlap that can be found when news outlets gather their pieces from outside sources for reprinting (or online publishing) so I made sure I was not doubling up on the same pieces.

information in mind, I read each article during my literature review for information regarding the accuracy of Ron Woodruff's story. *The Guardian* ran an interesting review that rated the film on its history as well as its ability to entertain. It scored a B for entertainment, but barely passed on historical accuracy with a D- (von Tunzelmann, 2014). With respect to Rayon, the author writes how the filmmakers give Ron a “fictional trans woman sidekick...though it doesn't seem entirely sure what to do with her.” It describes Leto's role as “clichéd” (von Tunzelmann, 2014). What is interesting to note is that Leto thinks of Rayon as being situated outside of these clichés (Wloszczyna, 2013).

Time Magazine, in a piece entitled *The True Story of Dallas Buyers Club* (Dockterman, 2013) did a fact check on the movie's story. The filmmakers describe the creation of Rayon as to help “underscore Woodruff's growth in his understanding of the LGBTQ community and AIDS” (Dockterman, 2013). In other words, the trans woman is being used as a prop. Rayon is meant to represent not just trans people, but the entire LGBT as well. This demonstrates the screenwriters' lack of knowledge on LGBT issues as whole because there has been – and continues to be – a large gap amongst members of LGB and trans communities with regards to the role trans people play and/or want to play in the LGB. Dr. Viviane Namaste writes about the problematic alliances between trans people and LGB communities because not all trans people identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. She writes how “most transsexuals do not want to have any formal association with the lesbian/gay communities” (Namaste V. , *Beyond Image Content: Examining Transsexuals' Access To The Media*, 2012, p. 481). One of the many problematic

elements of *Dallas Buyers Club* is how it lumps us all into the same category and then distills us down to the most vulnerable of all clichés: The pathetic trans woman.

It is interesting to note that the mainstream press has nothing but praise for Jared Leto's¹⁰ performance in the film. Discussions on the lived experience of trans people is erased in these reviews and replaced by congratulatory “ooohs and ahhs” at the makeover of a handsome man into a drug-addicted, AIDS-inflicted trans woman. The artificiality of Jared Leto's transformation is rewarded over the reality and hardship of what it means to be trans. It is the actor's privilege as a white male (rock star) and actor that allows him to cross gender lines to great acclaim without suffering the consequences faced by many trans people in their daily lives. The positive reactions by noted film critics simply reinforce what Julia Serano refers to as “extraordinarily artificial” class systems based on attractiveness and gender, where the audience is not required to question “the authenticity of the barrier being crossed” (Serano, 2006, pp. 59-60). None of the reviewers ever take the time to mention how Rayon is misgendered throughout the entire film or to question why the misgendering may be necessary to the film for narrative reasons. They do take the time to describe Leto's “attentive, detail-oriented portrayal of the fragile but supremely street-smart (Rayon)” (Kenny, 2013) as “fearless” (Highfill, 2014).

¹⁰ According to the Internet Movie Database (IMDB), Jared Leto got his big break as an actor on the short-lived television teen drama *My So Called Life* (1994). He moved on to many supporting film roles that challenged the notion of him simply being another Hollywood pretty boy. These films included the controversial *American Psycho* (2000), and the cult classic, but still controversial *Fight Club* (1999). Leto went through grueling physical changes to play a drug addict in *Requiem For A Dream* (2000) and gained over 60lbs to play John Lennon's killer Mark David Chapman in *Chapter 27* (2007). He had not taken on a film role since, mostly due to the success of his band 30 Seconds To Mars, which kept him busy touring the world's arenas.

It was no surprise to me when I heard that Jared Leto was going to play Rayon that he was going to immerse himself in the role. What shocked me was the amount of ignorance he displayed towards the trans community when the time came for him to promote the film and - later - accept awards for his performance. Most of the interviews conducted with him revolved around the difficulties he faced, as a man, playing a woman. The discussion almost always centers on the artificiality of transformation with Leto talking about the “physical elements” of “playing a woman”: “It’s wild, even putting on lipstick is a very shocking thing, putting on heels is a very shocking thing, putting on tights is a shocking thing” (Spero, 2014). The actor exerts power over the trans woman through his personal choices of how he believes a trans woman should speak, walk, and posture herself. If that is not harmful enough, Leto was always available to talk about his waxed eyebrows, his waxed body, and in his Golden Globe Awards acceptance speech for Best Supporting Actor Drama, the line he drew with respect to waxing his private parts.

I was glad to see that I was not the only one who took offence at his award show speech. In an op-ed piece for Salon, Daniel D’Addario writes how Leto had previously referred to Rayon as “transgendered” and said “the film had no political valence” (D’Addario, 2014). If speaking for others is a problem, I also believe that not speaking for others can also be a problem. Jared Leto does an excellent job at erasing trans women and replacing them with lipstick and gloss.

5.2.3) Untransing Dallas Buyers Club: Rayon as Drag Queen

The mainstream and queer media attention given to *Dallas Buyers Club* assumes that Rayon is trans. This discourse creates a situation where Rayon can only be seen as

one type of (negative) representation of a trans woman and the film itself can be read as transphobic. Queer media is quick to take this position because it can be used to create discussions around issues of marginalization and the lack of trans role models in popular culture. I took this position as well.

My recognition – from a trans spectator position - with Rayon’s lack of agency, results in my allegiance to the character whereby I take the insults lobbed at her by Ron personally. I see Ron as the heteronormative – yet still diseased – society and myself as the marginalized person who is not allowed to assert her authenticity. I am just like Rayon.

I am nothing like Rayon.

The cultural meanings and fascination of Rayon’s transformation – not just from male to female but – from able bodied to disability as her illness and addiction grasp tightly around her do not apply to me. Yet, I choose to read her as trans because the negative moving images that she presents makes me stronger. I use Rayon as a means to shout to the world, “this is not what all trans women experience”.

My lack of recognition – from a trans spectator position – of Jared Leto’s white able-bodied cisgender privilege fuels my anger at his interpretation of trans. I see heteronormative society’s praise of Jared Leto’s transformation while my own transformation leads to marginalization and loss of privilege. I am nothing like Jared Leto.

The cultural meanings and fascination of Jared Leto’s transformation – not just from male to female – but from sexualized rock star to feminized emaciated AIDS patient do not apply to me. Yet, I choose to read his performance as trans because the negative

images he portrays make me stronger. I use Jared Leto as a means to shout to the world, “this is not what all trans women experience”.

While I find power in denouncing Rayon as another in a long list of pathetic trans archetypes, this must be balanced by looking at the film’s trans moving images through a framework that takes the film’s time period and use of language into account. What was considered trans in the mid-1980s? Why does Rayon accuse Ron of being such a “homophobic asshole” (Borten & Wallack, 2012, p. 39) rather than a transphobic asshole? Rayon never expresses any desire to change gender¹¹. Her attraction to other effeminate gay men can be interpreted as a form of relationality that allows for a trans reading of the film (Rayon as a trans woman attracted to effeminate men) or it can be untransed and observed as one gay man’s attraction for another. In that case, Rayon is not trans but rather a gay man performing (female) gender.

I do not consider Rayon the “drag queen” to be as threatening to trans subjectivity as Rayon the “trans woman”. That being said, it is unfair to trade the marginalization of one group for the marginalization of another. The real harm incurred by *Dallas Buyers Club* is not the insistence that Rayon is trans but queer and mainstream media’s shortsighted rendering of the character as representative of an entire community.

5.3) Transparent (Jill Soloway, 2014)

Scene: Family Room, Montréal Suburbs, Fall 2014.

The trans woman has just downloaded the first episode of Amazon’s *Transparent*. She has heard good things about the series and is excited to finally see a take on the trans narrative that doesn’t involve sex or murder. She

¹¹ During a scene at the Lonestar bar, Rayon asks Ron if he thinks the barmaids tits would be the right size for her (Borten & Wallack, 2012, p.71). This is the only time that Rayon mentions the possibility of any permanent secondary sex characteristic enhancements to her body.

cheers as the protagonist's story unfolds. The trans woman recognizes her own conservative Jewish upbringing and internalized transphobia in the frustration and fear demonstrated by Maura as she slowly emerges into her own. The pilot episode has barely ended before the trans woman has written to her thesis supervisor asking him if she could include *Transparent* in her corpus. The supervisor responds positively. The trans woman smiles.

This thesis originally included the Greek film *Strella* (Panos Koutras, 2009) as the third film in my corpus. I had chosen it because of the way that it treats the sexuality in trans. It allows the trans body to be a part of healthy sexual engagement even if the film's narrative went off into problematic directions of deceit and incest. As with *Hedwig and The Angry Inch* and *Dallas Buyers Club*, I was able to recognize and align myself with certain character elements while still being extremely troubled by others. I was beginning to question my choice of trans moving images when Jill Soloway's *Transparent* was released. I was able to replace *Strella* with (my allegiance to) Maura. *Transparent* hit all the right chords for me. Maura's story is compelling, familiar, different, and - most importantly - respectful to trans coming out narratives.

In order to better demonstrate my relationship with the trans moving images in *Transparent*, I chose to focus on the second episode of the series, *The Letting Go* (Jill Soloway, 2014). I elaborate on three key scenes in particular because they allow for an access to a trans gaze along the lines of what Halberstam proposed with her reading of *Boys Don't Cry* (Halberstam, 2001). In this section I also take up a trans spectator position that unpacks the many story beats that parallel aspects of my personal narrative.

5.3.1) Please Let Me Do This: *Transparent* is transparent

Transparent is a ten-episode television series produced by online retailer Amazon.com. The show is available to stream through their Amazon Prime pay service.

The series follows retired professor Mort Pfefferman (Jeffrey Tambor) as he begins his transition to Maura at the tender age of sixty-eight. Maura has three children (two girls and a boy), an ex-wife whom she remains close with, and a valuable property in the Pacific Palisades that she bought before the housing boom. The first episode – *Pilot* (Jill Soloway, 2014) – introduces the audience to Maura and her family and sets up the main themes of the series. These themes include love, secrets, authenticity, change, and family.

The second episode, *The Letting Go* (Jill Soloway, 2014), opens at the moment where the pilot episode leaves off. Maura Pfefferman – in full make-up and flowing dress - has come home to find her hetero-married daughter Sarah (Amy Landecker) in the middle of sexual foreplay with her gay-married college fling Tammy Cashman (Melora Hardin). There is an awkward moment where the three characters make initial contact; a few words are exchanged. Sarah wants to know what her father is wearing while Tammy comments on Maura's nice appearance. Maura sits down on the bed and reaches for her daughter to join her. "Ever since I was five. I felt that something was not right". Maura searches deep within herself for the words to express how she feels. Sarah interrupts her: "Dad, dad". "Please... God... Let me do this." Maura is struggling to speak. She explains how times were different and how people led secret and often lonely lives. Sarah looks puzzled as she asks her father: "Are you saying that you're gonna start dressing up as a lady all the time?" "No", Maura responds, "All my life... my whole life. I've been dressing up like a man. This is me."

This pre-credits scene lets the audience adopt a transgender gaze that enables a universal spectator position because Maura is portrayed in a fashion that is both sympathetic and confident. She remains at the peripheral of traditional trans archetypes

because she cannot be read as victim or deviant. She is relatable to mainstream audiences because her story of longing and need for authenticity is familiar. Soloway based the character on her own father's coming out as a trans woman and her writing the character as a late-life transitioner, divorced and with adult children reflects positively. Unlike Kimberly Pierce's use of Halberstam's transgender gaze to create sympathy for Brandon Teena through brutality and victimization, Soloway's use of the same gaze generates compassion through familiarity and confounds common assumptions of trans moving images.

The title card reads "1989". Mort Pfefferman is walking down a college hallway, towards the camera. He looks nervous as he shuffles his way into his office. The blinds are closed and a small desk lamp provides the only light. Mort unlocks the desk drawer and takes out a shopping bag. He gently places it on his desk and removes its contents. Wrapped delicately in decorative tissue is a piece of women's clothing. Mort loosens his tie as the camera pans down toward the garment. There is a jarring knock at the door as a student calls out "Professor Pfefferman, is it too late?" Mort sits in silence waiting for the student to leave. The scene cuts to present day with Sarah in Tammy's car. The two women have just left Maura's house. Sarah is laughing while mentioning the sight of her father dressed as a woman. Tammy: "That was... that was really brave of her."

This flashback scene is all too familiar to many trans people but it also works on levels that generate audience identification with those outside the trans experience. The traits depicted by Mort in the flashback correspond to veils of secrecy that can be found in many (trans) narratives. The look of stunned silence on Mort's face as his student's knocking punctuates the scene, interrupting an important moment of needed privacy,

creates a situation of recognition between spectator and moving image. This is the alignment that opens the door between trans and cis viewers. Mort's trans struggle becomes a universal human struggle. The scene concludes just before the closing credits with Mort exiting his office into the empty hallway. He is walking quickly away from the camera. His briefcase is in his left hand and a crumpled up paper shopping bag is in his right hand. He tosses the bag into the trash bin without slowing down. The scene cuts to Mort exiting his car. He stands outside his house, staring at his young family through the windows off in the distance. The scene transitions back to present day. Maura is staring in those very same windows. She sees her younger male self enter the house, place his briefcase down on the counter and kiss his children.

The 1989 flashback best demonstrates what is referred to by trans folk as purging. Purging is when a trans person throws out all traces¹² of their cross gender life in order to return to the "safety" of their "normal" life. The scene is remarkable because it articulates the desire to be authentic juxtaposed with the guilt and shame that prevents trans people from being just that. Cultural obligations imposed on gender variant people by a society steeped in traditional patriarchal gender roles results in the trauma associated with purging. Purging is cyclical. It will not end until one comes out no matter how much one may think otherwise.

In between this powerful flashback, the universal human struggle for acceptance is carried over into a scene where Maura, having found an ear in her fellow trans support group member Davina (played by out trans actress Alexandra Billings), details how she followed all the rules of heteronormative society. "... I did the whole... I don't know...

¹² This includes clothing, make-up, wigs, breast forms, binders and packers (for trans men), books, magazines, etc.

Jewish thing. It's like musical chairs. You choose the one standing closest to you. We had three kids..." This resonates with anyone who has felt societal pressures to conform and especially on those around Maura's age who grew up during less tolerant times.

The narcissistic nature of transition is apparent as Maura's concern for the well being of her self-centered adult children has shifted to the side. She only wants to talk about herself after a lifetime of living for others. She shows more interest in the feminine material objects on display in Davina's apartment than in the story she is telling her. It is a feeling that I understand well. It is narcissism as a means of survival. It is also a trait that can alienate potential allies – onscreen and off. *Transparent* handles possibilities of audience alienation the easy way by making Maura's children unlikeable characters and by not playing up her sexual agency.

I do not have children. I was not married before I came out. I am not a member of AARP. Yet, I am *Transparent*. The series cuts across many of my personal intersectionality experiences such as my cultural background (Jewish), my race (white), my socio-economic class (educated, upper middle-class), and my transness. Sexuality is not part of *Transparent*'s discourse (in its first season) so I am free to leave my lesbian card at the door. *Transparent*'s trans moving images cut deeper for me than any theoretical structure of sympathy because I have lived Maura's internalized transphobia brought on by a patriarchal Judeo-Christian cultural system that values the first-born male child over all else. My internalized transphobia was reinforced by a conservative Jewish upbringing that expected me – as first-born male – to uphold certain traditions such as marriage and fatherhood. Maura's wine-fueled confessional to Davina reflected certain truths that I had experienced and shared with other trans people. The trans moving

images in that scene did not need to work at creating an alignment or allegiance with me; my recognition was instant and my identification profound.

Transparent does not contain the same trans woman archetypes as previous trans films but I do wonder if the unsexed nature of its protagonist is a good thing. Throughout the first season, every character on the show – except for Maura - is either engaging in sexual activity or discussing the possibility of having it. Queer sexuality plays a part in the relationships between Maura’s children and peripheral characters. If they can queer their sexuality, why can’t Maura? Does Maura’s age give Soloway an out from discussing trans sexuality? The serial nature of the show will hopefully open the character up the discourse surrounding ageism and sexuality. Granted, at the same point in my transition I was not concerning myself with intimacy with others. It was all about me.

The themes of change and transition in *The Letting Go* are used to create an allegiance with Maura that will carry through the entire series. The trans moving images in *Transparent* are so nuanced that cis gender audiences are invested as emotionally in her experience as trans audiences. Due to its nature as a series rather than a single film, the transing of *Transparent* occurs organically where an invested spectatorial response can happen outside of a transgender gaze. The character of Maura permits an audience engagement rarely seen in Hollywood’s trans moving images because the viewer’s understanding of her narrative grows as she transitions. It is quite beautiful.

5.4) TRANSlate This

Scene: Marriott Residence Inn, Cambridge, MA, Spring 2015

The trans woman has signed up for a Netflix account in order to keep herself busy in-between researching and

writing her Masters thesis. She searches for as many trans-related films and documentaries as possible. She comes across the film *Gun Hill Road* (Rashaad Ernesto Green, 2011). It stars up and coming trans actress Harmony Santana as a young Latina trans woman adjusting to her father's return home after a lengthy prison term. The film's narrative cuts across many levels of intersectionality like race, culture, and economic status. The trans woman admires the bravery of Santana's performance as it deals with gender identity issues, the trans body and sexuality. She wonders how Harmony Santana would have portrayed Rayon.

5.4.1) Trans (Body)¹³ Image Received

My spectator position as a trans viewer analyzing trans moving images through an autoethnographic lens creates a situation where my reception of the images in my corpus can be positioned outside of the traditional male gaze. I choose not to see trans moving images from *Hedwig and The Angry Inch*, *Dallas Buyers Club*, and *Transparent* through a male gaze that historically interprets trans bodies as camp drag (Bell-Metereau, 1985). My research suggests that how a trans person receives trans moving images impacts a trans individual's lived experience more than the images themselves. For example, as an out trans woman who considers herself to be influenced and affected by the styles of music she consumes, I am aligned with Hedwig and Rayon from a recognition based on glam and punk rock cues. Other trans spectators may view them as I do or they may choose not to. This depends on many factors including how they choose to situate themselves as viewers and create structures of sympathy with Hedwig and Rayon. Their structures of sympathy for these characters may also change, like mine did, over time and repeat viewings. They may also change over the course of one's transition. For example,

¹³ For the purpose of this analysis, I use the term "trans body" to define the image projected by artifice rather than medical intervention. This section looks at trans moving images created by codes and symbols rather than by body modification.

I no longer recognize Rayon and Hedwig that same way as when I first proposed them as (filmic) subjects for my thesis. This has as much to do with my learning curve on analyzing issues of identification as it does with an increased level of confidence with respect to my transness.

Hedwig and Rayon share varying performances of male to female (MTF) femininity but when I view these characters through my trans gaze I do not find any of the trans moving images to be coded as camp drag. Hedwig performs a variation of drag but she does not present herself as the typical queen. She is drag by way of glam rock princess. Her narrative may be built around an “angry inch” but her look does not shock. The typical vestiges of drag such as wigs and make-up are used to convey her outsider status as neglected rock star and spurned lover without presenting her as a gender outlaw. I do not see Hedwig as an exaggeration of feminine expression. While some audiences may choose to recognize Rayon’s image solely as a reflection of her function within the narrative (as drug addicted, comic foil and partner to Ron), her thrift-store duds via Marc Bolan shag can also be seen to reinforce her gender fluidity and allow her to take up position between punk, drag and trans. Her ill-fitting clothes and ripped tights symbolize her outsider status as glam rock regardless of her being a down-and-out drug addicted sex worker. The common thread – pun intended - is not drag as female impersonation but rather codes and symbols possessed by (gender-variant) individuals at the fringes of society, whether they be punk rocker or street walker.

Hegemonic notions of drag as camp female impersonation are implied by cis gender societal norms and not necessarily by my trans reading of Hedwig and Rayon. While Hedwig has found mainstream acceptance as a fringe icon with suburban kids (and

their parents) doing their best “Hed Head”, I cannot find any examples of teens dressing up as Rayon for a late night screening of *Dallas Buyer Club*. The gender transgression presented by Hedwig and Rayon has more in common with 1970s punk and glam rock than it does with current discourses on what is trans (Namaste V. K., 2000, p. 81) (Hebdige, 1979, pp. 59-62).

Maura’s style is less problematic because her image is age appropriate by Western standards, unsexed, and does not threaten the position of those within the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. She remains a part of the pathetic trans woman archetype if only in appearance. Maura wears flowing dresses that mask the shape of her body so it cannot easily be read as male or female. While most trans moving images have sensationalized the before and after of gender change through body modification, *Transparent* avoids it entirely. There is never any discussion as to how Maura intends to physically change her gender other than by living her femininity authentically. A case could be made that *Transparent* does a disservice to trans awareness by erasing this aspect of trans identity from its narrative. I contend that it substitutes discussions on body modification by placing trans actors in many of the supporting roles. I feel that this population of the *Transparent* world by trans people allows for a representation of trans people where we are simply a part of a whole rather than othered through sex¹⁴ change.

5.4.2) Family is Familiar

Rather than reading the texts in my corpus with an eye solely on trans body image, I choose to situate the images within the larger context of communities. This facilitates the application of theories of identification and structures of sympathy that

¹⁴ I use the word “sex” here to denote a surgical modification of sexual organs.

shifts along with my understanding of what is trans. Untransing moving images proves to be as important to my research as transing moving images. My personal journey from presenting as male to presenting as my true female self is reflected not in the trans moving images I have seen over the years but rather in how I choose to see those same images now. Trans moving images of gender variant bodies and tropes of trans femininity have made way for a deeper comprehension of marginalization and a need for authenticity that has paralleled my own. This need can be found in acceptance by - and in the creation of - family.

All three characters in my filmic corpus present trans moving images and narratives rooted in family. Maura is a reflection of a shift in trans images from the harmful trans woman archetypes to ones based on a lived experience that includes traditional – in this case Jewish - family dynamics as part of its narrative. She is the character that I most recognize and align with at this moment in my life. Hedwig is a reflection of the punk glam music she plays with her band where family is chosen for reasons as simple as queer umbrella identity or as complicated as transnational politics. Rayon's sense of family is found in the tragic circumstance of disease and addiction. Her family consists of LGBT people marginalized by sickness and sexual orientation and neglected by a cis gender society that wishes they would just disappear.

The theme of family plays a part in many Hollywood trans moving images and presents itself in various forms in the lived experience of trans people. I find it important to recognize the role of family in my corpus and how this identification stems from my own choice of family during the stages of my long coming out process. When I started frequenting drag bars around late 1999, my first chosen family consisted of drag queens,

trans sex workers, part-time cross dressers, and young t-girls¹⁵ in transition. The same internalized transphobia that kept me in the closet also kept my blood family out of the equation until I decided to transition in 2006. Back then, I used to see trans moving images the same way that I used to see young people who were in various states of gender transition; with fear and admiration. I lived in fear because I knew that I was trans just like them but I also admired them for having the courage to be true to who they were regardless of what I assumed would be negative consequences.

As long as it took me to finally come out, it took me even longer to realize the real problem I had identifying with trans moving images was that I was caught up in the physical aesthetic of the trans character. I viewed them from a universal spectator position that defined them based on characteristics rooted in Western heteronormative standards like body type, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation (in addition to the trans woman archetypes) and decided that this somehow impacted my ability to come out. I have come to realize that trans moving images are more encompassing than body aesthetic. The fictional environment surrounding these images and how they are used to forward the trans characters' narrative plays an important role in my trans way of looking. By opening my eyes to the diverse family constructs within the narratives of my corpus, I create new structures of sympathy with trans moving images that work past individual character traits while avoiding having to form allegiances with characters who I may find objectionable or who I may feel are not an accurate representation of what is trans. Through my trans gaze, Rayon is no longer representative of the entire LGBT

¹⁵ This was the term we used in the clubs to refer to all trans women before it was replaced with the umbrella term, trans.

family and Hedwig becomes a gay man performing a glam punk variation of drag and it is okay because they are still familiar to me, like family.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Allusions

Scene: Marriott Residence Inn, Cambridge, MA, Spring 2015.

The trans woman and her partner slide under the covers of their hotel room bed. They angle the laptop computer just right and click the start key. The movie they are watching has a horribly generic title - *Boy Meets Girl* (Eric Schaeffer, 2014) but it features a charming and heartwarming performance by Youtube discovery, Michelle E. Hendley. What separates this film from other romantic comedies is that Hendley's character, Ricky, is trans. So is Hendley.

The trans woman and her partner slide under the covers of their hotel room bed. They angle the laptop computer just right and click the start key. They are watching the latest Netflix series, *Sense8* (The Wachowskis, 2015). It is an overly philosophical program from the creators of *The Matrix* (The Wachowski Brothers, 1999) but it features a strong, sexual, and heartwarming performance from Jamie Clayton. What separates this series from other science fiction programs is that Clayton's character, Nomi, is trans. So is Clayton.

6.1) Trans Moving Images: Let's Review and What Is New

Trans moving images have been problematic since cross dressing for comedic effect first appeared in Hollywood cinema in the 1920s (Russo, 1981) (Bell-Metereau, 1985) (Phillips, 2006). The discourse has been populated with academic dissections and pop culture riffs on trans woman archetypes that have situated us between pathetic characters in need of sympathy and deceitful ones who elicit revulsion (Phillips, 2006) (Serano, 2006). These limited and often troubling portrayals of trans people by cis gender actors can be likened to the portrayal of disable people by able-bodied actors. While (trans) moving images have not been proven to have perlocutory effects on (trans)

individuals' personal narratives, some readings of these texts by queer and mainstream audiences remain problematic.

The success of trans actress and activist Laverne Cox has propelled the trans narrative to the forefront and opened up a dialogue concerning trans representation in popular culture (Steinmetz, 2014). Cox's - as well as Janet Mock's - speaking engagements at colleges and universities have resituated trans women of colour as leaders in trans activism even as they remain victims of transphobic violence (Molloy P. M., 2014) (Molloy P. , 2014; Kellaway, 2014) (Giovanniello, 2013).

In the time it has taken me to research and write my thesis, pop culture representations of trans people and their associated moving images have shifted dramatically. Mainstream media is still filtering trans moving images through a cis gender gaze that is fascinated by the before and after of gender change but the language and tone used has become more compassionate rather than accusatory (Harris, 2015). Laverne Cox's glamorous image has been plastered across countless mainstream magazine covers, but she has used her image to further the discourse on heteronormative beauty standards and the erasure of trans women (of colour) and trans men who do not fit these norms, even as she falls into them herself (Williams, 2015) (Maerz, 2015).

Caitlyn Jenner's very public coming out on ABC's 20/20 television program hosted by Diane Sawyer (who famously got her start as an assistant in Richard Nixon's administration) followed by a 21-page spread in *Vanity Fair* (Bissinger, 2015) with glamorous photos by famed photographer Annie Leibovitz has increased trans awareness and ignited debates ranging from how white privilege plays into the financial cost of

gender transition to the emotional trauma associated with maintaining western beauty standards.

Thanks to the inroads made by Cox, Mock and other public trans pop culture figures; it is not only the narratives that are changing with the moving images. Trans actors are starting to play trans characters (mostly) in television¹⁶ roles that allow them to be sensitive, sexual, and confident without having to resort to previously acknowledged trans woman archetypes in the media. Some of these roles are even being written by trans women for trans women, as is the case with Lana Wachowski's creation of hacktivist Nomi Marks (Jamie Clayton) for the Netflix series *Sense8* (The Wachowskis, 2015).

While television has begun to include fictional trans narratives in addition to the abundance of already available trans reality based programming (Harris, 2015), filmic moving images appear to be slower in embracing trans characters played by trans actors. Eddie Redmayne, the 2015 Academy Award winner for Best Actor for his role of ALS sufferer Stephen Hawking in *The Theory Of Everything* (James Marsh, 2014), moves from the awards show bait of disability to the awards show bait of gender transition for his role as Lili Elbe in *The Danish Girl* (Tom Hooper, 2015). Hollywood industry news source Deadline Hollywood Daily ran an article suggesting how the positive reception of Caitlyn Jenner's coming out story could actually boost the awards chances of Redmayne and *Transparent*'s Jeffrey Tambor (Hammond, 2015). The article insinuates that Redmayne looks so good as a woman that he may get his own Vogue photo spread timed with the film's release in November of 2015.

¹⁶ It is important to note that at the time of this research, these trans moving images are only appearing on pay channels or services like Netflix and not on free broadcast television.

In a cover story entitled *America's Transformation*, Entertainment Weekly's Mark Harris writes about the problematic nature of treating a marginalized community, like trans people, as product for "consumers of mainstream culture" and how it is only slightly better than excluding them from the pop culture landscape entirely (Harris, 2015, p. 32). The article describes the phases of minority representation that we see on television. These phases shine a light on the history of trans moving images that I find insightful. The first phase involves the absence of the trans character or their appearance through the use of stereotyping. In the second phase, the trans character is the teacher of tolerance who appears briefly to cis gender characters to provide them with some sort of life lesson before disappearing back into the shadows. The third phase is where Harris finds current trans moving images; it is where trans narratives are finally getting told. He believes that we are not that far off from the fourth phase, where trans characters are allowed to "stick around" simply because "we're interested in them" (Harris, 2015, p. 33). One of the strongest arguments Harris makes for this new interpretation of trans moving images is when he states that "who's behind the camera matters as much as who's front of it" (Harris, 2015, p. 33).

This concept of what I call "trans for trans moving images" is slowly starting to come to bear. *Transparent* and *Sense8* are just the beginning of what I hope will be more responsible, varied, and inclusive trans narratives. Having trans people participate in the production of trans moving images – be it behind the camera or in front of it – may be the best way to ensure that our stories are treated with dignity (Harris, 2015) (Utichi, 2015). Thankfully, it looks like this is where trans moving images are heading.

6.2) Pass The Umbrella: It's Raining Trans

With these new ways of creating, producing, and distributing trans moving images, it may be time to re-evaluate how trans moving images are defined. My research has led me to re-evaluate where I see myself as trans and - upon deep reflection – how I choose to see trans moving images. My initial definition of what is trans may have been too encompassing and led me to situate myself (as a trans viewer) in positions that were harmful to my lived experience when they need not have been.

The umbrella term of transgender may be problematic (Devor, 2014, p. 1). It was initially created to give a home to all those who feel, perform, identify etc. along lines of gender fluidity. My issue with this is that it appears to place those who feel their mind is not in alignment with their body in the same category as those who are comfortable with their gender and cross dress for fun. This widening of the definition of trans (Ryan H. , 2014) has allowed for an increase in social and cultural awareness for trans communities but I feel that it is causing harm with respect to issues of identification with trans moving images. I do not think the problem stems entirely from the characters but rather from how the images are received by different spectator groups. I have demonstrated in my corpus that *Hedwig and The Angry Inch*, *Dallas Buyers Club*, and *Transparent* all feature trans characters under the trans umbrella. What my research has led me to consider is that some trans people – like myself – may receive and recognize these images differently depending on where they are in their personal gender transition in addition to where they find themselves under the trans umbrella. This may lead to – and necessitate - what I call an “untransing” of certain characters and images that trans viewers, like myself, may no longer recognize from their trans spectator position.

The trans umbrella presents a dilemma in that some trans moving images that may be harmful as representations of trans communities to cis gender communities may – in fact – not be trans at all. Pop culture’s assimilation and aggregation of all trans moving images may be what is truly harmful because they do not differentiate enough between characters and continue to rely on trans archetypes and cinematic tropes that do not permit a comprehensive understanding of gender variance through moving images. The narrative always reverts back to the dysphoric body.

I discovered that it was in my best interest to dismantle the trans umbrella when analyzing trans moving images as a form of harm reduction. By excluding certain images, I found inclusion. I saw my trans experience represented by not seeing it in Hollywood’s trans moving images.

6.3) Maura means “Teacher”¹⁷: My Transitioning Gaze

Scene: Bedroom, Montréal Suburbs, 2015.

The trans woman and her partner have decided to watch some television before drifting off to sleep. As they flip through the available channels, they come across the HBO documentary *Larry Kramer in Love and Anger* (Jean Carlomusto, 2014). The documentary focuses on Kramer’s role in founding the Gay Men’s Health Crisis and the protest group ACT UP (Sundance Institute, 2014). The couple stays up past their bedtime discussing the importance of Kramer’s activism and the controversial methods that had many in the gay community accusing him of self-hatred. The trans woman worries that her research is leading her in a direction where the only way to truly change trans moving images is by changing how trans people choose to identify with them. She worries about being accused of self-hatred.

¹⁷ Maura or “morah” is the Hebrew word for “teacher”.

As researcher and research subject, my decision to look past the male gaze and become “bearer of the look” has been a difficult process. I struggle to look past the negative impact that Hollywood trans moving images have had on my personal narrative in order to create structures of sympathy that permit me to recognize, align and form allegiances with characters and situations unfamiliar from my own. The theories of identification (Smith M. , 1994) used in my work have helped me work through personal trauma that I believe to be magnified by traditional methods of identification (Cohen, 2001) with trans moving images. When I proposed my thesis, my intention was to demonstrate the harmful effects that Hollywood trans moving images have on my transness through their erasure of actual trans lived experience. What I once saw as harmful, I now see as a form of knowledge that advocates for new ways of defining trans moving images and spectatorship. While this knowledge may be helpful to my appreciation of what is trans (moving images), it may be seen as problematic to trans communities and activists.

My findings suggest that my identification issues with trans moving images have to do not only with whether or not the image is trans but also with who decides what is trans. My corpus was chosen because it contains Hollywood trans moving images with characters that are easily defined by already existing trans woman archetypes. There is plenty of material readily available from both scholarly sources and social media on two of my chosen texts, *Hedwig and The Angry Inch* and *Dallas Buyers Club*. I falsely believed that the texts in my corpus would be easy to tear down and use as fodder to further the discourse on Hollywood’s lack of realistic trans representations. It never

occurred to me that my analyses would necessitate a re-assessing of what I consider to be trans moving images in order to re-situate myself as a trans spectator.

While I cannot speak for others, my study has prompted me to deconstruct and relocate certain trans moving images outside the trans umbrella so that previously harmful images lose their power over me. I am aware that my current politics of location plays an important part in seeing previously harmful trans moving images from a new spectator position. For example, I am no longer that closeted trans woman sitting in a darkened theatre recognizing her hidden trans self in the artifice of Hedwig's material femininity. As an out trans woman living my authentic feminine self outside of traditional Western feminine gender expectations and expression, I choose to see Hedwig as a glam punk icon rather than as the "transgender rock star" that pop culture has labeled her (or should it be hir?). Hedwig's angry inch does not make her female any more than her collection of wigs and speckled lipstick. My trans gaze has shifted so that I no longer create structures of sympathy based on the same signs and symbols that I once used to assign transness to Hedwig. I am trans. Hedwig is not.

I advocate for a resistance to Hollywood's trans moving images by assessing whether or not certain images are trans in relation to one's subjective position as trans spectator. It is not enough to simply push for the production of new – and more positive – trans moving images. Nor is it enough to hope that trans artists will be enough to create more respectful images. My findings may be considered problematic because I am asking the marginalized trans person to bear the brunt of the emotional work needed to refuse and challenge potentially harmful images. I am not saying that I am not offended by many of the trans moving images being produced by Hollywood. What I am saying is

that since I do not recognize my trans body in any of these trans moving images, I choose to align myself with different signs and symbols outside of transness. In doing so I remove what once triggered harmful emotions and replace them with positive signs from other aspects of my lived-experience like the glam rock soundtrack that I recognize in *Hedwig and The Angry Inch*.

If my recognition and alignment with glam rock allows for an untransing of *Hedwig and The Angry Inch* and *Dallas Buyers Club*, then my Jewish cultural and religious upbringing creates an immediate structure of sympathy with the trans moving images in *Transparent*. Interestingly enough, the reading of the Jewish religious text called the Haggadah during the Passover Seder¹⁸ details the various symbols and signs that God presented to Moses in order to guide him and the Israelites out of Egypt. The intangible signs and symbols of Jewish daily life as presented in *Transparent* and the expectations and obligations associated with the first-born male¹⁹ are easily recognizable to me. These signs and symbols help guide me through my identification with Maura in a way that is relationally different than my experience with other trans moving images. Unlike *Hedwig and The Angry Inch* and *Dallas Buyers Club*, there is no need for an untransing of *Transparent* because I do not see the signs and symbols outside of Maura's transness as a means to resituate her under my trans umbrella. Maura is trans. So am I.

¹⁸ Seder is the Hebrew word for "order". The Passover dinner proceeds in a certain "order" to fulfill religious obligations respecting the plight of the Israelites and their escape from slavery in Egypt.

¹⁹ According to religious texts, Jewish first-born males were spared when the Angel of Death passed over the homes of Jewish families who had abided by the rule of God by marking their doorposts with the blood of a lamb or a goat.

6.4) Inclusion via Exclusion

Much in the way that queer theory includes trans moving images under its queer umbrella ignoring the notion of separation of sexuality from gender (Leung, *Keywords: FILM*, 2014, p. 86), trans studies chooses to include all gender variant images in its definition of “trans in film” ignoring the relevance of gender transition over cross dressing tropes. Scholar Helen Hok-Sze Leung is taking this discourse forward into an understanding that same-sex desire and cross-gender identification do not fit into neat little boxes and that trans film studies has only started to explore these issues (Leung, *Keywords: FILM*, 2014, p. 88). That being said, mass media and social media have been happily accepting the “any representation is good representation” politic even as many trans activists and bloggers have written extensively on the problematic nature of the moving images they consider to be trans. My research demonstrates how the three sets of moving images in my corpus feature gender-variant characters that elicit varying degrees of transness depending on how I view them. It is possible that if trans social media chose to untrans *Dallas Buyers Club* that Jared Leto’s Rayon may be seen as an effeminate gay man with AIDs and a Marc Bolan fetish. This interpretation is less harmful to me. I am trans. Rayon is not.

I envision scholarly works that resist Hollywood’s definition as to what are trans moving images. Perhaps a deeper study on considerations of trans embodiment for public consumption will lead to further discussions on the possible benefits of untransing Hollywood moving images? If trans activists could untrans characters like Rayon or Hedwig, how would they analyze their respective images and would they help or harm

trans communities? Would this resisting of problematic trans images lead to more positive and inclusive trans moving images?

I can now view the (trans) moving images in my corpus from a self-created safe space of trans spectatorship. I remove problematic characters by passing the (trans) umbrella. I chose my corpus based on how I saw the trans moving images in them at the time. I never thought that my spectator position would shift in such a way as to consider theories like untransing in order to erase harmful representations from my viewing experience and seek out new ways to identify with problematic trans moving images. It is just as important to recognize the effects of exclusion on trans moving images as the inclusion of them. Sometimes a lack of recognition can make one ('s spectator position) stronger.

6.5) My Transition's Omission or Final Thoughts

The most difficult part of negotiating my corpus is the pace at which trans is moving within the pop cultural context. The three texts in my corpus were chosen for the specific reactions I had to them upon first viewing. Each of the texts impacted my transition over a lifetime of internalized transphobia, fear and self-hatred. I had hoped my thesis would provide a more intersectional approach to analyzing trans moving images but I understand the limitations of my experience as well as the images themselves. As such, I can only speak from my politics of location.

I am fortunate enough to be in a financial situation that literally afforded me the ability to make the interventions I felt were needed to live my authentic life and prevent myself from becoming another tragic statistic. Others are not sure fortunate. While race plays an important role in the sexual, physical and verbal abuse of trans women of colour,

my experience with race comes from an intersectionality where race is assigned to me. As a person who grew up in a Jewish household, I pass as white until my religious and cultural background is made clear and I somehow become a part of the “Jewish race”.

My way of looking at trans moving images has changed drastically since I proposed this thesis. I wonder if ways of looking at trans moving images has also changed for cis gender heteronormative society as well? The discussion around the coming out of Caitlyn Jenner is mostly positive. Laverne Cox’s image is on billboards and magazine covers all over the United States promoting the latest season of *Orange Is The New Black*. Will Hollywood’s trans moving images turn me into “that transgender person I know” to all the people who cut ties with me when I came out? Who will I become to the people reading this who are unaware of my transness? Has their gaze shifted like mine?

Scene: Montréal Suburbs, Living Room, Summer 2015.

The trans woman is visiting with her neighbors. The CBS television program *Big Brother* is playing in the background. One of the “housemates” on *Big Brother* (2015) is a trans woman named Audrey Middleton (Wagmeister, 2015). While the neighbors are aware that their friend is a graduate student in Women’s Studies and that she is writing her thesis on trans people in popular culture, they are unaware of her transgender status. One of the neighbors turns to the trans woman and asks her if she “knows” that there is “a trans” named Audrey on the show. The trans woman responds in the affirmative. The neighbor continues, remarking how Audrey looks so much “like a real woman” before correcting herself, “she is a woman”. The trans woman comments on the problematic nature of judging the authenticity of trans women based on their appearance but she is happy that her neighbors’ gaze towards gender-variant people is shifting.

The trans woman sits back in her seat, pauses and nervously wonders if she will have to come out all over again.

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