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Trans Stories, Trans Voices: How the Internet Empowers Transgender Creators to Have Agency in Trans Fiction

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Trans Stories, Trans Voices:
How the Internet Empowers Transgender Creators to Have Agency in Trans Fiction

By

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An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
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Abstract

Although many advocates believe that the increased representation of transgender people in mainstream fiction will lead to more understanding for the transgender community, many transgender scholars (Page, Richards) are critical of representation that is created without any involvement of actual transgender people. Some fear that the more radical perspectives of trans lives are being erased and replaced with a homogenous idea of the kinds of trans people who are “acceptable” (cárdenas). To avoid this homogeneity, it is important to allow for a multiplicity of trans perspectives and empower transgender people to have agency over their own narratives.

The goal of this project is to highlight how trans agency in story telling can benefit trans fiction and take it beyond simply providing a “trans 101” for cisgender audiences. It will also address how the internet has benefitted trans creators by providing a platform for a variety of trans voices to share their stories. By analyzing fiction that centers on transgender experience and is created by transgender people, this thesis will explore the topics and issues addressed in trans stories and the diversity in the perspectives shown. Internet-based fiction such as webcomics and web series will be examined, as well as a trans authored anthology that was funded online. Examining these stories may show us what we are missing by relying on the current homogenous mainstream representation and open our eyes to the importance of empowering transgender people to tell their own diverse, radical stories.

Introduction

Is there power in representation? In the realm of improving transgender people's lives, the representation of trans characters in fiction offers the potential to empower the trans community. However, even though transgender media representation has been increasing, and portrayals of transgender characters have become more sympathetic, many transgender activists and theorists are critical of how these characters are portrayed and the limited narratives and roles that they are allowed to inhabit (cárdenas). One of the main critiques of these trans stories is that often they are not told by transgender people. Cisgender (non-transgender) writers, directors, and actors have the power to create and profit from transgender stories, while transgender people have no power over the stories that are told about them. This is not to say that cisgender creators should never make stories that include transgender characters. The issue is that transgender creators are denied the opportunities to tell their own stories, and their voices are often silenced by the same people who claim to be making them more visible. Transgender people have been denied agency in the telling of their own stories in the mainstream, and that lack of agency not only impacts the quality of transgender fiction but also the quality of transgender lives and people's perceptions of their futures.

For many queer activist organizations, like GLAAD, an LGBTQ+ media advocacy group, greater transgender visibility is thought to be a sign of progress. Surely the inclusion of more transgender characters in media will create more empathy for the trans community by breaking down the negative stereotypes about transgender people that so many cisgender viewers have

been conditioned to believe. This may not be the case, however. In the anthology *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, some trans and feminist theorists (Page, cárdenas) suggest that the increasing visibility is not helping the trans community as much as people would like to believe. A large part of this is due to the lack of control that trans people can exercise over their own stories.

Many of these theorists, like micha cárdenas, believe that we should stop focusing on trans visibility and start focusing on alternative ways to support trans people. In cardenás' case, her focus is increasing safety for trans people by helping them form communities and build strength. These theorists are correct in their assertions that representation will not solve all the problems the transgender community faces. There is still much important political, legislative, activist, and community work to be done in order to end discrimination, ensure equality, and improve the lives of transgender people. Even so, I do not believe that representation should be abandoned altogether. Perhaps, instead, we should reconsider what representation has the power to do. It is time to move away from the goal of using fiction to help cisgender audiences understand what a transgender person *is*, and to move towards using fiction to help transgender people imagine what they could *be*.

In this shift from education to exploration, we can find the Trans New Wave. The Trans New Wave is a movement in trans storytelling where creators assume that the audience already understands the basics of trans identity, and therefore they are free to tell stories about transgender characters where their transness is not the story. These creators can explore other issues beyond coming out and transition. They are also no longer forced to simplify transgender existence into a form that is easily understandable for cisgender audiences. Trans New Wave stories break the cycle of trans stories created by cisgender people for cisgender people. They are stories by trans creators, about trans characters, created for trans audiences. By moving beyond

the same voyeuristic or tragic stories so often repeated in the mainstream, the Trans New Wave allows for transgender audiences to imagine new and better futures for themselves.

“Trans Stories, Trans Voices” is interested in these stories of the Trans New Wave, and the creativity, perspective, and imagination that can be accomplished when transgender creators have agency over their own storytelling. Agency is a form of power, and in this case, it is the power that a trans creator has to tell a trans story, their own story, to reclaim an often-misrepresented identity and imagine a new vision of transgender future. Many of these Trans New Wave stories cannot be found in the mainstream. Instead, they are most often found on the internet, which for years has been providing a platform for a diverse community of transgender creators to share their stories, largely free from commercial influence, or the need to appeal to a cisgender audience. This freedom can lead to more experimental, personal, diverse, and nuanced stories. Therefore, two out of three of the stories I have examined are web-based media, while the third is from an anthology that was funded, promoted, and sold online. By examining these trans produced stories, this thesis strives to illuminate how trans creators explore a variety of issues, both unrelated to and intersecting with transgender identity, as well as how they craft diverse, genuine, and hopeful narratives of trans lives. When transgender creators have agency over their own stories, then transgender representation can empower trans audiences to imagine a future that is neither tragic nor absurd. In this way, representation can allow trans people to imagine a future where they are the heroes of their stories, deserving of love, community, and admiration.

There are some limitations to this project, however. While there is a lack of representation of transgender people in mainstream media, that lack of content seems to be reflected in academia as well. When searching for “gay media representation” on the academic digital library JSTOR, there were 12,095 results. The search for “transgender media

representation” produced 1,164 results. The accuracy of the search engine is limited, however, and only two of the twenty-five articles displayed on the first page of results appeared to have anything to do with transgender representation in the media. There are very few peer-reviewed or scholarly sources about transgender media available; consequently, the literature reviewed in the Context section of this thesis relies on non-peer reviewed online sources. Due diligence has been done to assure that the information used is accurate and trustworthy. Many of the sources are from respected LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations, online articles written by transgender authors, or interviews with transgender creators. The fact that there is so little research in this field could have been a deterrent to completing this project but truly acts as evidence that this project, and those like it, are needed.

Before I introduce and explore the stories of the Trans New Wave, I will provide background on current issues related to transgender representation and trans creators’ agency in the context section. I will identify the barriers that prevent transgender creators from having a voice in the mainstream and explain how transgender storytellers use the internet to reclaim their agency and share their own diverse and radical stories. After providing this socio-historical context for my analysis, I will examine three trans produced stories. The first section of analysis will focus on *Her Story*, a drama and romance web series created, written, and performed by queer and trans women that explores the intersection of gender and sexuality, transphobia in the LGBTQ+ community, and domestic violence. The second section will focus on *Grease Bats*, a monthly webcomic produced by genderqueer artist, Archie Bongiovanni, whose genderqueer character Andy deals with dysphoria, mental illness, activism, and community. The third and final section of analysis will focus on a short story about an autistic trans man fighting for his right to exist entitled “Schawalbero, Ohio,” which appears in the anthology *Meanwhile, Elsewhere: Science Fiction and Fantasy from Transgender Writers*. Following these sections, a

section titled “The Role of the Internet” will highlight how the internet aids in the telling of trans stories and how that aid is being threatened. Through the examination of these three stories, this thesis hopes to illuminate the diversity of experiences within the trans community as well as the personal and social issues that these trans creators have chosen to address in their constructions of trans lives.

Context

In 2014, *Time* Magazine published a cover story titled “The Transgender Tipping Point.” The article discussed the rise in awareness of transgender issues as well as the activist efforts to pursue equality for transgender people. It also highlighted the rise of transgender visibility and representation of transgender characters in the media, such as Sophia Burset in the Netflix original series *Orange is the New Black*. Sophia was played by Laverne Cox, an actress, activist and trans woman of color, who became the first transgender person to appear on a cover of *Time* when she appeared in this cover story. At the time, Cox’s character was one of the few representations in mainstream popular fiction of a transgender character that was portrayed sympathetically. The character of Sophia Burset was groundbreaking because she was not presented as a predator, a pervert, or a subject of pity or ridicule, which was previously how most transgender characters like Sophia were presented.

How transgender characters are represented in the media can affect how real transgender people are viewed and treated by cisgender people. A 2017 report by The Williams Institute found that approximately 1.4 million adults and 150,000 youth aged 13-17 in the United states identify as transgender (Herman et al. 2). However, according to a Harris Poll and GLAAD study published in 2015, 84% of Americans claim that they do not personally know someone who is transgender (GLAAD). Even though awareness of trans issues and trans lives has undoubtedly risen in the last few years, only 16% of Americans (roughly 52,559,000 people) say

that they know someone who is transgender. This means that for a majority of Americans, their only exposure to trans people is through the media they consume.

The representation of transgender people in mainstream media has increased dramatically since *Time's* 2014 article. According to GLAAD's annual "Where We Are On TV" reports, scripted television shows went from having one transgender character in the 2014-2015 season to 26 transgender characters in the 2018-2019 season. For many trans activists and trans inclusive feminists, this increased representation of transgender people was thought to be a sign of hope. More representation would surely lead to more empathy for a community that has often been marginalized or made invisible. However, there are some trans activists and scholars who believe otherwise. The anthology *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* contains essays by trans theorists exploring the pitfalls and limitations of trans representation today. Some, like Morgan M. Page, believe that the increase in trans visibility is connected to an increased vulnerability for transgender people (Page 143). Indeed, since the 2014 *Time* article, the trans community has faced the brunt of transphobic bathroom bills like House Bill 2 in North Carolina, Trump's recent transgender military ban, and, in 2017, the highest recorded rate of murder due to transphobic violence in the U.S. (Human Rights Campaign). Other scholars, like micha cárdenas, believe that the mainstream representation we have now sets limitations on who is an "acceptable" trans person by promoting stories that fit into a one-dimensional, pseudo-normative narrative, and cutting out all other aspects of trans life that do not fit into this limited idea of what it means to be trans (cárdenas 170).

Increasing transgender representation will not solve every issue that faces the trans community. There is still much work that needs to be done through activism, community building, and legislation. However, I still believe that there is power that comes from being visible. In the case of the transgender community, the issue is not their visibility, but rather *who*

is making them visible. One of the main reasons that mainstream trans stories are being criticized by activists is that these trans stories are largely being produced by cisgender creators. In Morgan M. Page's essay, "*One from the Vaults: Gossip, Access, and Trans History-Telling*," she writes,

At least part of the poisonous nature of this problem may be due to the fact that, for the most part, these cycles of media visibility have been outside of the control of trans people. Whether in "gender novels," in which cisgender writers claim a stake in telling our narratives without us, films, in which the few non-murderous or non-comedic trans characters are inevitably played by cis actors (as was the case in Tom Hooper's 2015 film *The Danish Girl*), or the entire genre of invasive trans documentaries made by cis filmmakers, we have been rendered powerless by media representations of our own narratives.

This quote highlights the lack of control that transgender people have over how they are represented and the exclusive and often exploitative ways that trans stories have been told by cisgender creators.

Most of the trans stories that we see presented in television and film are written, directed produced, and often performed by cisgender creators. These stories by cisgender creators then are lauded as the "best" portrayals of the transgender experience and receive awards and critical acclaim, yet there are no transgender people on the creative team. These creators proclaim the good that their projects do for the trans community when in actuality they drown out trans voices. This "visibility" renders the trans community invisible because in these cases transgender people have no agency over their own stories, and they cannot challenge the stories told by others with more power and media connections.

We need more stories with transgender characters, but when trans creators are not involved in the telling of these stories, then there is a risk of doing more harm than good. Jen Richards, a trans writer, producer, and actress, has given examples and explanations of this harm in her criticism of *The Danish Girl*. Richards, in the 2016 panel “Trans Stories: On Film and Online,” expressed her disappointment with the 2015 film because “it was about us, but didn’t include us.” She argued, “This was a tragedy for cis consumption that had no trans people involved at the level of the novel that was written, the director, the producer, or the stars” (Frameline40 Panel). *The Danish Girl* followed the real-life story of Lili Elbe, a trans woman and artist who was one of the first to receive sex reassignment surgery. While the film won several awards for its portrayal of Elbe’s story, it also faced criticism from the trans community because Elbe was played by cisgender male actor Eddie Redmayne.

Putting cisgender actors in the roles of trans characters is one of the ways that harm can be done when trans people are removed from the telling of their own stories. Richards, in an article for *Logo*, explained that films that have a cisgender man playing a trans woman can be dangerous, because they reinforce the idea that “transgender women are just men with good hair and makeup” (Richards). This belief not only invalidates the identities of transgender women but also puts them at risk of homophobic violence from straight men who are afraid of being perceived as “gay” because of their interest in a trans woman. In their article “‘Gender Normals,’ Transgender People, and the Social Maintenance of Heterosexuality,” Kristen Schilt and Laurel Westbrook assert that “doing gender in a way that does not reflect biological sex can be perceived as a threat to heterosexuality” which causes cisgender men who perceive trans women as gay men and “gender deceivers” to react violently in order to reassert their masculinity and heterosexuality (Schilt and Westbrook 442). Richards expands on this, writing “Every time a cis man gets applauded for bravely portraying a transgender

woman on screen, every time he picks up an award for it while sporting a tuxedo, we're reinforcing the belief that at the end of the day, a trans woman is still really a man" (Richards). These cisgender actors are rewarded for playing a transgender role and praised for increasing transgender representation, when they are actually, intentionally or not, reinforcing a harmful idea that can contribute to violence against trans people.

Another issue is that, without a multiplicity of trans voices being involved in the telling of trans stories, cis creators can continue to recycle what they know about the trans experience, knowledge that largely comes from media produced by other cisgender creators. This can lead to the creation of a normative and biased idea of what trans stories are or what they should be. One of the dangers of this pseudo-normative bias is that it can be used to decide what kind of trans stories, and trans people, are "acceptable." This is the danger that Cárdenas warns against in her article, "Dark Shimmers: The Rhythm of Necropolitical Affect in Digital Media." Cárdenas fears that the media's representation of transness erases the radical history of trans struggle and resistance. She believes that even in this moment of increased visibility for the trans community, the political issues that have been important to many trans activists have been ignored or forgotten. Only the "acceptable" trans characters, those that are willing to assimilate and conform to neoliberalist ideology, get to have their stories told, while those that do not conform to are "disposable."

This normative bias can also lead to a lack of intersectionality in trans stories. Much of mainstream media overlooks how different facets of a trans person's identity, such as their race, sexuality, or level of ability can affect their lives. Characters are reduced to their transness, and they are not allowed to have intersecting marginalized identities. A majority of trans characters in mainstream films are white. Mainstream television, however, has a higher percentage of trans

characters of color, according to GLAAD's 2018-2019 "Where We Are On TV" report. In terms of sexuality, however, about fifty percent of fictional trans characters identify as straight, while twenty-four percent identify as gay or bisexual and the remaining twenty-six did not have a confirmed sexual orientation. In their report, GLAAD explained that this may be because "in some instances it appears that the series creators and producers haven't given much thought to the fact that trans people also have sexual orientations" (GLAAD 28). The representation of trans people with disabilities is severely lacking. Of the 26 transgender characters on scripted TV shows this season, four were categorized by GLAAD as having a disability. These four characters were all HIV-positive. No trans characters with other types of disabilities were represented.

The very way that trans stories are told in mainstream media can also fall into a limited, homogenous pattern. A majority of trans stories in film and television made by cis creators are focused on transition. Transition may be very important for some trans people, but mainstream media's obsession with it borders on being exploitative. A transition story told from the "outside" perspective of a cisgender creator frames the transition, and trans life itself, as exotic, an object of prurient interest. These narratives also reduce the stories of trans people to their transition, providing a limited scope of the trans experience and the trans person. Cis creators are caught in a loop of telling this story over and over, of trying to explain what a transgender person is, which leaves no room for experimentation, complication, or adventure. There is no room for a transgender character whose story focusses on something *besides* their transness.

So how can we stop this cycle of exploitation and open the door for creative, radical trans stories that break past the recycled, "acceptable," normative narratives? *By supporting more trans creators and empowering them to have agency in telling their own stories.* Empowering trans creators to have agency in trans storytelling could help them overtake the exploitative,

outside-looking-in perspective in current mainstream trans story-telling and make room for a multiplicity of trans voices to tell a variety of stories that focus on more than just trans identity. The 2016 panel “Trans Stories: On Film and Online” brought together several trans creators to discuss how important it is to have trans people in control of telling trans stories, and how it could benefit both the media created and the community it is created for. Trans actress and founder of TransTech Social Angelica Ross told the audience, “We can empower other people by not just putting the lens on them, but by bringing them behind the lens” (Frameline). Director Rhys Ernst, another panelist, added. “Empowering people to be the story tellers-- that is really the future. That’s really where I want to see things go is trans people telling stories, authoring stories, being a writer, making films, making short films, directing, show running. That’s really how we’re going to effect change long term, whether or not the content is always about trans issues” (Frameline).

One mainstream show, *Pose*, which premiered on FX in 2018, has already begun to implement these ideas with great success. *Pose* is a fictional show that explores the underground world of drag ball culture of the 1980s. Five trans women of color constitute the cast of characters, and each role is played by a trans woman of color (one of whom is Angelica Ross). Janet Mock, another trans woman of color, is also a producer on the show and has directed and written some of the episodes. Although *Pose* is not a perfect show, it is a beginning in terms of trans artists exercising agency in mainstream trans story telling. Unfortunately, *Pose* is the exception and not the rule. Most trans stories on mainstream film and television still do not have trans creators involved.

The unfortunate reality is that many transgender creators do not have access to most mainstream creative spaces. Discrimination in education can make it difficult for transgender creators who want to work in film or television to receive the training or experience to obtain

media positions. A 2012 report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey by Grant et al. found that discrimination, harassment, and bias against transgender students prevented them from having equal access to education, which can later impact their job prospects and income. Many students reported being harassed by other students or faculty, and 15% left school because of this harassment. In higher education, 11% of transgender students reported that they lost their scholarships or could not get financial aid because of their gender identity (Grant et al. 33). Harassment and the denial of resources can make it difficult for transgender people to complete their education.

For those who do manage to get an education where they receive training and experience, discrimination in employment can still prevent them from being hired in the media industry. Transgender people face double the unemployment rate compared to the general population. 47% of transgender people have been fired, not hired, or denied promotion because of their gender identity (Grant et al. 51). Even if a transgender creator manages to get past these barriers and get a job in the media industry, they may still face discrimination and find it difficult to rise to a position of creative authority in such a historically transphobic industry. Even when they do have the resources and training to tell their stories, the voices of transgender creators may get drowned out by a cisgender majority or silenced by a cisgender superior. The little representation we see in film and television is the result of a difficult battle for agency.

Mainstream film and television, however, are no longer the only access we have to transgender stories. In recent years, the internet has become a place where transgender people can discover resources, form communities, and even share their stories. In their 2006 book, *The Transgender Phenomenon*, sociologists Richard Ekins and Dave King declared that “the most significant change in the telling of [transgender] stories [has been] the rise of the internet” (Ekins and King 58). The internet has provided transgender people with free access to information and

resources and not just about transgender issues. While there are many websites out there now that have information about transition and passing for transgender people, there are also video tutorials for art and editing programs, blogs about writing and filmmaking, and other websites dedicated to help creators develop the skills to create better stories. The internet also provides a place for transgender people to form communities, even if they are geographically dispersed or even closeted in real life. These online communities can be beneficial for transgender creators who seek to fund their projects on crowdfunding platforms such as Kickstarter or Indiegogo.

Most critically, the internet provides a platform for trans creators to share their stories free from outside influence, giving them more agency in the stories they tell. This freedom allows for trans people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives to share stories that are multifaceted and varied, and that can stray from the basic transition narrative that is so commonly the focus of mainstream media. Trans characters in these fictions have unlimited options, from navigating romance to learning magic to fighting interdimensional monsters. These stories are part of what some trans creators are calling the “Trans New Wave.” In the 2016 panel “Trans Stories: On Film and Online,” moderator and filmmaker Sam Berliner described the Trans New Wave as “the idea that we can assume that audiences have a trans 101 in their back pocket, and we’re free to tell stories that have trans people in them, but their trans-ness is not the story. Their trans-ness is just part of who they are, and the story is all the other things about being alive” (Frameline). The stories of the Trans New Wave have more freedom to explore issues outside of the traditional transition narrative, including intersectional issues, and can help trans audiences imagine diverse and beautiful alternate forms of trans existence.

Access to these Trans New Wave stories may be encouraging for trans audiences who already have a comprehensive understanding of trans issues and are tired of seeing the same homogenous trans narratives playing out in the mainstream media. In the same “Trans Stories”

panel, Angelica Ross stated that “Social media, by allowing people to put powerful and truthful stories out there, has created competition for ‘blockbuster’ mainstream films. People are now realizing that this mainstream representation, which was all that they saw before, is mediocre” (Frameline). Even though trans-ness is not the focus of these stories, they still help increase empathy. As Ross reasons “The more you center a marginalized identity in a story, the more other people can relate” (Frameline). The trans stories that find a home online, that are produced by trans creators and funded by online trans communities are new and vibrant and varied, and yet they are still being looked over in favor of mainstream trans stories that are not created by trans voices.

“Trans Stories, Trans Voices” focus on stories produced in the “Trans New Wave” and examines trans-produced fiction in particular. While I mainly examine online media, such as webcomics and web series, I also examine a selection from the book *Meanwhile, Elsewhere*, an anthology of fantasy and sci-fi fiction by trans authors, which was crowd funded and sold online. My goal is to analyze how trans creators explore different themes and issues in ways that may diverge from the mainstream media and even media produced by other trans creators. The truth is, there is no one “true” trans story. Trans fiction is as varied as the trans voices that tell it, and this project seeks to highlight the brilliance and creativity that comes with this variety of trans voices.

Her Story

Her Story is an example of trans women taking control and telling their own stories. The six-episode web series, co-written and co-created by Jen Richards, a trans woman and activist, premiered on YouTube in January of 2016. The story features two trans women, Violet, who is played by Richards, and Paige, who is played by black trans woman and entrepreneur, Angelica Ross. The series reached a wide audience and garnered great positive acclaim. It received a special recognition award from GLAAD Media, The Gotham Independent Film Award for Breakthrough Series- Short Form, and it was nominated for an Emmy for Outstanding Short Form Comedy or Drama Series (HerStoryShow.com). The series deals with complicated topics such as the intersection of gender identity and sexuality, domestic abuse, and transphobia within the LGBTQ community in a smart, nuanced way, all while telling a beautiful, romantic, and hopeful story.

From its inception, it seems that much of the motivation in creating *Her Story* comes from the desire to tell the stories of trans women from the perspectives of trans women. In an interview with the *Advocate*, Richards said that the story "was born of ... my desire to show trans people in the way that I saw them, in all their trauma, humor, and complexity" (*Advocate*). Her co-star, Angelica Ross, said that much of the story came from her and Richard's experiences and conversations, and that it was important for them to create a story about trans people that did not come from a cisgender perspective. "Up until this point, most portrayals of trans stories have been from the outside in." Ross said. "*Her Story* gives audiences a fresh perspective from the

inside out” (*Advocate*). The role of the people behind the story was focused on almost as much as the story itself in the promotion of the project. In a video promoting *Her Story’s* Indiegogo campaign, which was to help raise money for post-production on the series, Jen Richards told prospective backers “not only does the subject matter center the experiences of queer and trans women, but it was made by us as well, including our writers, our directors, our stars, and two-thirds of our cast and crew.”

The main relationship of the show is between Violet, a trans woman played by Richards, and Allie, a lesbian reporter played by Laura Zak, who is a queer cis woman and the other co-writer and co-creator of the series. Through their relationship, the series explores how sexuality intersects with gender and gender identity, and how one’s identity can become complicated when they consider these intersections. As mentioned in background, this intersection is often overlooked or ignored by mainstream series creators, who seem not to have considered that transgender people also have sexual orientations.

From the beginning, Violet seems to be more interested in women, but she admits that while she had mostly dated women before, she had only dated men since her transition. In the first episode, she is shown searching the website craigslist for “m4t,” meaning men looking for transgender (female) partners, typically for a sexual relationship. The screen shows a flood of results, many of which use crudely sexual or fetishistic language to describe trans women. When Violet tries to search for “w4t” (women for transgender) she gets no results. The show suggests that Violet has a harder time finding female partners, possibly because of the assumption that all trans women are straight and desire to be with men. The profuse number of results for “m4t” on craigslist illustrate not only this assumption but also the way that trans women are openly sexually objectified and fetishized by cisgender men. They do not necessarily represent that there are absolutely no cisgender queer women who are interested in trans women, just that these

cisgender men are unabashed at seeking a trans woman for a purely sexual relationship.

However, this may be the assumption that Violet takes from her craigslist search, as she seems dejected afterwards.

The series makes clear that the reasons for Violet's lack of experience with dating women are as much internal as they are external. In the beginning, Violet seems to be holding herself back from entering a relationship with a woman. In one of her first conversations with Allie, when they are not yet romantically involved, but the chemistry between them is clear, Violet explains, "When I'm with a man, there's no doubt about my womanhood. My body next to theirs is so obviously feminine" (*Her Story*, episode 2). She tells Allie that when she is with a cisgender woman, she is constantly comparing herself to her more feminine body, and that it's harder to feel present with that much self-doubt and anxiety running through her.

At one point, Violet asks her friend Paige, "Do you think that me liking a woman makes me less of one?" Paige tells her that it does not, but the question of how trans identity can intersect with sexuality is asked throughout the series, from both sides of the relationship. When Allie starts to realize that she likes Violet, she becomes worried that this makes her "less lesbian." Her fears are not assuaged by her lesbian friends, one of whom, Lisa, insists that trans women cannot be lesbians or be in a lesbian relationship because of their genitalia. Another one of Allie's friends, Jenna, insists that a cisgender lesbian woman cannot date a trans woman, "not unless you wanna stop claiming the term 'lesbian,' and I'm not losing my gold star" (*Her Story*, episode 2). Here, "gold star" refers to "gold star lesbian," a term for a lesbian who has never been with a man. It is obvious that these two friends do not validate Violet's gender identity, and still consider her a "man." Allie gets upset about their comments and storms off. Thankfully, one friend, Kat, follows her and encourages her to pursue Violet, saying, "Last time I checked, 'lesbian' means loving women. So what's the problem?" (*Her Story*, episode 2).

The scene described above illustrates another issue that runs throughout the series: transphobia within the LGBTQ+ community. Some characters, like Jenna, display “casual” moments of transphobia, by making comments that seem innocuous, but still invalidate the identities of trans people or set them apart as “other.” The character of Lisa, however, is shown to be unabashedly transphobic. She repeatedly mis-genders Violet, calling her “he,” and uses slurs like “tranny.” Lisa is a lesbian who works at a women’s shelter and claims that trans women do not belong in women’s spaces because they are not “real women.” She tells her friends, “if a guy wants to throw on a skirt and call himself Veronica, that is fine. But I don’t think I should share a bathroom with him” (*Her Story*, episode 2). The ease with which she makes these hostile comments shocks and angers Allie and is meant to shock the audience as well. Her transphobia, even when it is not immediately called out by other characters, still brings an uneasiness into her scenes, making it clear that the audience should be uncomfortable with this behavior. This is brought to a head when Lisa expresses interest in Paige, without realizing that she is a trans woman. When Allie, in a fit of frustration, calls Lisa out on her hypocrisy and tells her that Paige is trans, Lisa then outs Paige, a lawyer for Lambda Legal, in the newspaper. The narrative clearly does not condone her actions, as all the other characters tell Lisa that she had no right to out Paige, and Paige herself confronts Lisa and shuts down her transphobic comments in a moment that is incredibly satisfying for the audience.

Aside from her conflict with Lisa, Paige’s story mostly focuses on her own set of struggles with dating. Paige is straight, but because she “passes” as a cisgender woman, she must navigate whether to disclose her trans identity to the men that she dates. Violet tells Allie that in the past, when Paige has told men she was transgender, they acted ashamed of her, saying, “she’s told me multiple stories about guys who say they that they don’t mind that she’s trans as long as she doesn’t mention it. Ever. To anyone” (*Her Story*, episode 3). In the second episode, a man

who, it is implied, has just slept with Paige, says that they should get together again soon, but becomes cagey and leaves once Paige suggests that they go out to eat at a nearby restaurant. It is clear that this man is happy to use Paige for sexual pleasure but is uncomfortable with being seen in public with her. This man, and the men that Violet describes to Allie, seemingly have no problem with Paige's trans status, until there is a risk of others finding out that they are romantically or sexually involved with a trans woman.

Later in that episode, Paige meets James, who is instantly enamored with her. Although she starts to tell him that she is trans on their first date, she is afraid that he will no longer like her, and decides not to. Near the end of the series, James finds out that Paige is transgender when she is publicly outed in the newspaper. At first, James seems upset that she didn't tell him, but then admits that he has a gambling problem, and says "I'm just trying to understand when would have been the right time to tell you that" (*Her Story*, episode 6). He obviously understands Paige's hesitancy to share what she considers her "complications." In the end, he admits that he really likes her, and although the ending is left ambiguous, it is implied that they stay together.

The series shows a happy ending to a situation that often ends badly for trans women in other media. The "Transgender Trap" trope has been used in shows and movies such as *NCIS*, *Family Guy*, and *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*. The trope paints trans women who do not immediately disclose their trans identity as deceitful and devious, and it often ends with the man who has shown interest in a trans woman being disgusted, sometimes to the point of physical sickness, when he discovers that she is trans. This situation is usually portrayed as humorous on screen, but in real life, it can be dangerous and even deadly. Many of the perpetrators of violence and murder against trans women are their acquaintances, friends, or partners. In many states, it is still unfortunately permissible to use the "trans panic" defense as a legal tactic to mitigate the murders of transgender people in court. According to the National LGBT Bar Association, the

“trans panic” defense is used to convince the jury that the victim’s gender identity is to blame for the defendant’s violent reaction, up to and including murder (Lgbtbar.org).

Although, the “trans panic” defense is not specifically mentioned in the series, Violet does speak about how other people, including police officers, have used her trans identity as an excuse for the violence committed against her. Near the end of the series, it is revealed that Violet has been in an abusive relationship with a man named Mark, who she met when she was an escort in New York. Mark is extremely controlling and grows angry and violent when Violet starts spending time with Allie, but Violet does not feel that she can leave him, because he has been financially supporting her and she feels she owes him. This is not her only reason for not seeking a way out, however. When Allie sees the evidence of Mark’s abuse, she begs Violet to go to the hospital or to the police, but Violet adamantly refuses, afraid that they will laugh at her. She tells Allie of a time that someone saw Mark hitting her and called the police. She describes the officers’ humiliating response, saying, “The police came, checked our IDs and they laughed. Asked him if he knew I was a guy, if I was trying to trick him.” These officers did not take Violet seriously or try to help her. Instead, they laughed and assumed that she was deceiving Mark, making it clear that they sided with her abuser.

According to “Still Hidden in the Closet: Trans Women and Domestic Violence,” an article published in the *Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law, and Justice*, “Trans women who experience domestic violence may not call on the police for help because of personal negative experiences or the prior negative experiences of other trans women” (Greenburg 230). These women, if their transgender identity is discovered, face the risk of enduring more harassment or violence from police officers who may view the trans woman as a deceiver. These officers may also refuse to help a trans woman because she does not fit their idea of “a woman the police would consider both in need of and deserving of protection,” or the idea of the “good” victim- a

white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class woman (Greenburg 232). Greenburg explains that “a trans woman victim, either because of her trans status or some other intersectional identity, may be disbelieved if she does not fit that model” (Greenburg 232). Of course, even a “good” victim may still be disbelieved because of the sexism inherent in the justice system. Women, cisgender and transgender alike, unfortunately face discrimination from police and courts who are more likely to take the side of (cisgender) men. Trans women, however, are more likely to face the brunt of that discrimination, both because of sexism and transphobia (and racism, in the cases of trans women of color). Through Violet’s story, *Her Story* addresses this discrimination, and points out flaws in the justice system that make it difficult for trans women to leave abusive relationships.

The 2015 Transgender survey report found that 54% of transgender respondents had experienced some form of intimate partner violence in their lifetime (James et al, 206). It is indeed very likely that many of those respondents, like Violet, refused to seek out help because they feared facing further humiliation and harassment from the police. While transphobic violence has been shown on screen before, I had never seen such a sympathetic portrayal of domestic violence against trans people until *Her Story*. The web series does not glorify the violence. There are no traumatizing extended scenes of Violet being beaten as she screams for help. In fact, the act of physical violence is never shown at all, only the aftermath. This narrative gives Violet dignity as a victim. The audience does not need to see her being physically abused to feel empathy for her; they feel empathy for her because they care for her as a character. It does not matter that Violet does not fit into the model that Greenburg describes of the “good,” cisgender victim. The audience understands that she deserves safety and care and a better, healthier relationship, and they want that for her.

In this instance, the use of the word “victim” rather than “survivor” is intentional. As Greenburg describes in “Still Hidden in the Closet,” society associates victimhood with white, cisgender, middleclass, heterosexual women, and ignores that people with other identities-- trans people, poor people, and people of color-- can also be victims of violence. Using the word “victim” in this instance acknowledges that Violet, a trans woman, has been abused, rather than dismissing her situation because she does fit into the model of the “good victim.” *Her Story* reinforces this without glorifying physical violence against trans women, by showing other forms of violence that are often overlooked in conversations about abusive relationships. Mark destroys the card that Allie gave Violet. He refuses to give her the keys to his car. He forces her to kiss him even when she is visibly uncomfortable with it, and he sends her angry text messages demanding that she come home when she is hanging out with Allie. He holds her past as a drug addict and sex worker over her head to try to convince her that no one will care about her except for him. These are all classic forms of emotional and psychological abuse that are meant to control Violet and render her powerless.

As much as *Her Story* is the result of trans women reclaiming agency in the telling of their stories, it is also a metanarrative about a trans woman who reclaims agency over her own life. Mark has been controlling Violet, keeping her from developing new, healthy relationships, like the relationship she desires to have with Allie. Eventually, she grows tired of this. When Mark discovers that Violet has continued to see Allie despite him forbidding it, he tries to manipulate her by saying “You were nothing before me.” Violet responds by saying “I’m less than nothing now, Mark, you’ve seen to that. I don’t want this. I don’t want any of this” (*Her Story*, Episode 5). Even after she leaves Mark, however, it takes some encouragement from Paige before Violet can finally break free and let herself pursue Allie. “You’ve got to stop letting other people define you.” Paige tells her. “It’s not about your job, or Mark, or even me” (*Her Story*,

episode 6). In the next, and final, scene of the series, Violet meets Allie outside of her apartment complex, and it is Violet who makes the first move and kisses Allie. This is Violet reclaiming her agency over her life and claiming the love story that she deserves.

The awards that *Her Story* has received are evidence of the strength and importance of its narrative, but even without that, the comments on the last episode of the series reveal how meaningful the show is. “Oh my goodness, this makes me so happy” wrote YouTube commenter Stef Sanjati. “I was so sick of seeing trans stories crafted for cis people. This is so refreshing and well done and intersectional and everything that we need. Thank you to each and every person involved in the creation of this series!”

Trans vlogger Gage commented “All I have to say is thank you! Thank you for finally creating a series that accurately represents the life of a trans woman, actually portrayed by trans women.”

Another commenter, Isabelle, wrote about how important the show was for her as a cisgender person. “Thank you so much for this show. As a cis woman, I realize that there is always so much to learn about trans women and examining how we contribute to the problem and also how we can be part of the solution without silencing the voices of trans women. You guys [*sic*] don't owe us any education, but I am thankful nonetheless for this series.”

In the *Trans Stories: On Film and Online* panel that Jen Richards and Angelica Ross both attended, Richards confessed that with *Her Story*, “we always thought our audience was other trans women.” Richards and Ross wanted to focus on telling a story by trans women, for trans women, but their story ended up resonating with people of all gender identities. They did not have to fill their story with exposition about what it means to be trans for the audience to feel empathy for the characters. As Ross explained, “The more you center a marginalized identity in

a story, the more other people can relate.” By centering trans women in their series, and focusing on their struggles, their relationships, and their stories, the creators of *Her Story* were able to take a particular experience and make it resonate with a universal audience. They used their perspectives as trans women to tell a lovely and complicated story that touched cisgender and transgender audiences alike.

Grease Bats

In December of 2013, *Autostradle*, a website focused on the issues of lesbian, bisexual and queer women, started a new segment called Saturday Morning Cartoons, where queer artists would provide a weekly comic on a rotating schedule. One of these periodic comics was *Grease Bats*, created by Archie Bongiovanni. Although much of Autostraddle's content is typically aimed at queer women, they are a trans-friendly website and have been including more content by and about non-binary individuals, those who do not identify with the binary genders of male and female. Non-binary identity is typically considered to fall under the trans umbrella and may encompass other types of identities, such as genderfluid, genderqueer, and agender.

Bongiovanni identifies as genderqueer, as does one of their main characters in *Grease Bats*, Andy. The "slice of life" comic is focused on Andy and their best friend Scout, a queer woman, as they navigate relationships, mental illness, and queer community. Before the comic began in earnest, Bongiovanni put out a short comic to introduce both themselves and their characters. In it, they include a panel with illustrations and information about Andy and Scout, including their pronouns.



Figure 1: Bongiovanni introduces Andy and Scout, from *Grease Bats*

It appears that it was important for Bongiovanni to make Andy's pronouns and genderqueer identity clear upfront, especially since Andy's pronouns are not used by another character until the third comic. Stating Andy's pronouns in the introduction comic makes it clear that Andy's genderqueer identity is to be taken seriously and helps prevent the audience from being confused or misgendering them as they read through the comic.

Within the comic, being misgendered is something that Andy deals with frequently. Andy is afab (assigned female at birth), and though they appear androgynous, strangers will still mistake them for female and refer to them as such, which frustrates Andy. They become visibly upset when people around them refer to them as a "lady" or use she/her pronouns for them. Although Andy gets misgendered by other characters in the comics, which is something that is difficult for many trans people, the narrative itself does not invalidate Andy's gender identity. When Andy becomes uncomfortable, it is normally their friends who stand up for them and correct those who misgender them.



Figure 2: Andy is misgendered by two women, from *Grease Bats*

The scene in Figure 2, from the comic “A Case of the Floppies” show how uncomfortable Andy becomes when they are misgendered. When they are called a “lady,” Andy’s mood immediately shifts from confident and joking to nervous and depressed, which goes unnoticed by the two women they were flirting with, who continue to use female pronouns for them. Andy’s friend Scout, however, does notice, and she steps in to correct the two women. By showing how Andy’s friends support them and respect their gender, Bongiovanni is asserting that being genderqueer is a real and valid identity and setting an example for how other cisgender allies can support their real-life non-binary friends.

Although Andy recoils when they are called “lady” or “ma’am,” they are shown to get excited when someone refers to them as “sir.” In the comic “Sir,” Andy’s friend Ari, who is a trans woman, tries to understand why this is, asking “isn’t someone calling you ‘sir’ just as

misgendering as someone calling you ma'am?" Ari's question leads to an interesting conversation about gender and how society values masculine traits over feminine. The conversation concludes with Andy stating that they are trying to redefine what masculinity and femininity means for them, or in their words, "deconstruct, decolonize, and DESTROY gender!" Although Andy's friend may question their reaction to being called sir, she still does not try to invalidate their feelings or their gender. Bongiovanni allows for Andy's feelings about their gender to be complicated, because for many non-binary people, gender can be complicated. The characters recognize that talking about gender can be difficult and confusing, and that often, there are no straight answers.

One of the reasons that misgendering may upset Andy so much is that it triggers their dysphoria. According to the American Psychiatric Association, "Gender dysphoria involves a conflict between a person's physical or assigned gender and the gender with which he/she/they identify. People with gender dysphoria may be very uncomfortable with the gender they were assigned, sometimes described as being uncomfortable with their body (particularly developments during puberty) or being uncomfortable with the expected roles of their assigned gender" (American Psychiatric Association). Some who do not believe that non-binary and genderqueer people belong in the trans community try to invalidate them by claiming that they cannot experience gender dysphoria because they do not identify with a binary gender. But dysphoria is not always about desiring traits of the "opposite" binary gender, and it can present itself in different ways.

In "A Case of the Floppies," Andy's dysphoria is triggered when they get their period. "All the wrong parts of me feel wrong." Andy tells Scout as they flop onto the floor. "All my parts that I try to ignore are just reminding me that I'm ALL WRONG." Here, Andy is clearly frustrated with their body, not for the way it looks, but how it is currently making them feel. In

mainstream media, dysphoria is commonly represented by a character staring longingly in a mirror, trying to picture themselves in the “right” body (which is typically the body of the “opposite” gender, since most mainstream representation recognizes only binary trans people). This image, however, focusses entirely on the outside appearance of the body. It does not consider the internal struggle that also comes with dysphoria. Here, Bongiovanni is showing how dysphoria can be triggered by things other than outside appearance, like Andy’s period or being misgendered, and how that causes Andy frustration, anger, and pain.

According to the APA, gender dysphoria can contribute to negative self-image and increased rates of other mental disorders (American Psychiatric Association). In *Grease Bats*, Andy is shown struggling with mental illness, which in some ways intersects with their trans identity. In “Feeling the Gender Feels,” Andy describes the overwhelming, paralyzing anxiety that they feel, mostly connected to their gender. In “Having a S.A.D” Andy mentions having S.A.D., or Seasonal Affective Disorder, a type of depression that typically lasts in the winter months. According to the American Psychiatric Association, LGBTQ+ individuals are 2.5 times more likely to suffer from mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse than their cisgender and heterosexual peers. That rate may be even higher for trans people when compared to cisgender members of the LGBTQ+ community. A recent study by Emerson Todd et al suggests that within the LGBTQ+ community, transgender individuals may be susceptible to higher levels of anxiety than their cisgender peers. Todd’s study also suggests that transgender people, who report less social support, may be at a higher risk of depression in contrast to their cisgender peers (Todd et al). In “Having a S.A.D.” Andy mentions that their family does not support them, does not speak to them, and that they ignore and hate Andy’s identity. This may also be negatively affecting Andy’s mental health. While this is a difficult topic, it is an important one for Bongiovanni to explore. As mentioned in GLAAD’s 2018 “Where We Are on

TV” report, only four transgender characters shown on television were portrayed with a disability. None of these characters have been shown struggling with mental illness, despite how much more prevalent mental illness is the trans community when compared to cisgender populations. Bongiovanni not only provides representation for trans people who deal with mental illness, but they also provide an image of hope. Even in the comics where Andy is shown to be suffering from their anxiety and depression, their friends always manage to pull them out of the darkness in the end.

In some of the comics, Andy’s sadness will turn into rage against racism and transphobia and the institutions that oppress them. Often, we perceive rage as negative, as something destructive. However, in “Tough Breaks: Trans Rage and the Cultivation of Resilience,” Hilary Malatino asserts that the rage of the oppressed, specifically trans rage, is not only a key for trans survival but is also a powerful creative force that spurs transformative world-building. At first glance, people may view Andy and their anger as wrong, as something that needs to be controlled and tamped down. But Andy’s anger is also part of what motivates them to help themselves and others like them to survive. According to Malatino in “Tough Breaks”, rage “is a manifestation of the *conatus*, of the drive to keep on living, in and through conditions that seem inimical to our survival” (12). When Andy expresses rage, it is because they are experiencing a world that is inhospitable to them. Their rage fuels their determination to continue to exist in this inhospitable world, even if it is purely out of spite.

Andy’s rage is not aimless or destructive, however. Andy is often shown using their anger and frustration with the way things are to motivate them to participate in many activist activities. Malatino tells us that “when that kind of anger is collectively mobilized, it becomes a movement... Movement: that which shifts the horizon of possibility for minoritized subjects, that which makes other worlds, other ways of being, more possible” (8). In the comic “Trump,” Andy

uses their anger over the 2016 presidential election to propel themselves into activism. They begin making signs for protests, planning fundraisers, calling their representatives, and donating to the trans lifeline. In “Sober” Andy gives up drinking during Transgender Awareness Month so they can donate the little bit of money they save to the trans youth network. They also list several other ways that they have become involved in the community, such as going to a protest, organizing a potluck, making art to donate to a non-profit auction, and attending a candlelight vigil. These actions are all fueled, at least in some part, by Andy’s rage over existing in an unjust society that is hostile to trans people, and their desire to change the inhospitable conditions of their world.

Many of Andy’s activist efforts center around their community, which plays an important role in *Grease Bats*. Andy and Scout are active members of their local queer community, often attending or even planning community events. But Andy also has a strong community of queer friends. Even though Andy may live in a world that tries to invalidate and discriminate against their gender identity, their friends are always shown supporting them. For instance, the frames in figure 3 highlight several instances where Andy’s friends are there for them. When Andy gets misgendered, like in “A Case of the Floppies,” their friends stand up for them. When they are anxious over their gender in “Feeling the Gender Feels,” Ari encourages them to talk about it, even though they protest at first. When they have trouble with their family in “Stoop Kid,” Scout plays a song to cheer them up. When they get overwhelmed with their activist work in “Trump,” she reminds Andy that they are not alone and offers to help by making political art and encouraging them to take care of themselves.



Figure

3: Different scenes where Andy's friends comfort them, from *Grease Bats*

In an interview for The Beat, Bongiovanni said, “When I created *GREASE BATS*, I sought to draw what the possibilities of radical friendship can look like. I wanted to draw a comic that reflected the nuances of who my community was — of who I am” (comicsbeat.com). Queer friendship and community are the heart and soul of *Grease Bats*. Even though Andy goes through some hard times in the comics, their friends are always there to help them, and they are there for their friends in turn. While the characters in *Grease Bats* go through their own struggles and conflicts, there is always an undertone of sweetness drawn from the love that they have for

each other. Bongiovanni shows the importance of queer community, and they surround their genderqueer character with friends who love and support them, no matter what struggles they face.

Meanwhile, Elsewhere

Meanwhile, Elsewhere: Science Fiction and Fantasy from Transgender Writers, is a futuristic, speculative fiction anthology published in 2017 by Topside Press, a publishing company dedicated to publishing transgender literary fiction. The book contains twenty-five stories by trans women, trans men, and nonbinary authors that explore trans lives in worlds that reach beyond the limitations of our own and acts “as both an escape from the current world and manual for your own possibilities” (Fitzpatrick and Plett 440). *Meanwhile, Elsewhere* was nominated for a Lambda Literary Award and received a Stonewall Book Award in 2018. Although the book was not originally published on the internet, I have included it in this discussion because of how Topside Press utilized the internet in the production, promotion, sale, and distribution of the product as well as how it exemplifies the Trans New Wave.

In the Afterword for *Meanwhile Elsewhere*, the anthology’s editors Cat Fitzpatrick and Casey Plett stated, “we wanted to make a book by trans writers that centered a trans reader as much as possible, that dispensed with the worry of explaining ourselves to cis people, and that would allow us to talk to each other” (Fitzpatrick and Plett 439). This clearly aligns with the basis of the Trans New Wave, in which it is assumed that the audience already understands the basics of transgender life, giving the authors the freedom to tell stories about transgender people that do not focus on their transness. In *Meanwhile, Elsewhere*, the trans identities of the characters are important, but not because the authors are focused, voyeuristically, on their transition. Rather, the authors are focused on exploring how their characters’ trans identities fit

into the fantastical worlds they have created. The genres of fantasy and science fiction enable us to imagine trans life in realities apart from our own. Some of these realities display a heartwarming picture of what our future could be, while others imagine how trans lives can be complicated or threatened by new technologies.

One of the anthology's stories, Brendan Williams-Childs' "Schwaberow, Ohio," explores the latter. The narrator, an eighteen-year-old trans autistic man named Walt, exists in a future filled with cyborgs and neurobiological behavioral modification implants. Although Walt lives on a rural farm with his aunt and uncle, he cannot escape the changing technological world. The new medical technologies being implemented should represent a positive change, and many people in Walt's world see them as such, but Walt sees them for what they really are-- a threat to his very existence. The neurobiological implants could be used to eliminate Walt's dysphoria, "fixing" him so he would no longer be trans or autistic. The story addresses how both trans identity and autism can be pathologized, viewed as medically or psychologically abnormal. The doctors believe that Walt's behaviors are abnormal, and so they seek to "fix" that abnormality with the implants.

The story is intersectional in how the implants threaten Walt both as a trans person and as a neurodivergent person. While being autistic is different from being trans, the doctors and politicians in "Schwaberow, Ohio" believe that both can be "fixed" by the implants. To them, both aspects of Walt's identity are shortcomings because they stray from the accepted norm, and therefore, must be corrected. Walt's identity as an autistic person is equally as important to him as his identity as a trans man, and he refused to let either be erased, despite the discrimination and alienation he faces because of it. In his narration, Walt reflects, "There is no should in my existence, not even the one the doctors suggested there might be; one with wires and codes. One where they could stop me from stimming and being trans. They couldn't. Statistically, someone

has to defy *should*” (Williams-Childs 300). Here, Walt is rebelling against society’s ideas of how he should and should not exist. The doctors believe that Walt should be cisgender and neurotypical, but Walt defies these ideas by refusing to let them change him.

Walt’s family members waver between reluctant acknowledgement of his identities and open hostility. His aunt is the most abusive toward him, calling him “the thing,” constantly misgendering him, and threatening to put one of the neurobiological implants in his brain. His uncle is the kindest to him, although he does little to actually defend Walt from his aunt’s cruel comments. Walt’s wayward mother acts sweet around him, but there is always an underlying note of pity or condescension when she speaks to him. Although none of his family members directly confront Walt about his being trans, he can feel the desire from his mother and his aunt to turn him back into a girl. He can feel them staring at him and “thinking about the *children they lost* when I’m still alive” and believes that for them, “not looking at me makes me go away and be the ghost girl they want” (Williams-Childs 301). Walt’s late father had even been willing to compromise his own beliefs in order to ensure his child was cisgender. Walt describes his father as someone “who hated robots and cyborgs until it turned out that making me into one of them could stop me from being trans” (Williams-Childs 306).

Walt is also often ridiculed for his autistic behaviors, by both his family and his doctors. His mother gets frustrated with how Walt repeats her words back to her, and asks him, condescendingly, “Do you have a single original thought in your head or do you just parrot back what people say?” (Williams-Childs 305). Walt, in his narration, explains to the audience, “I don’t parrot, I process. I have to make sure I’m hearing everyone right. When I was a kid, the doctors all said that this meant I was stupid. I could be so much smarter. They could program me to be smarter” (Williams-Childs 305). Walt has a distrust of doctors because of how they treated his autism as a child, and how they treated him as a trans person when he was older. He

describes many of the doctors as being dismissive of him or thinking he was “some kind of total idiot” because of his autism. He also describes doctors who did not take him seriously as a trans man and quotes them as saying that they believed his transition was “making a permanent mistake from a dysphoria easily alleviated by deep brain stimulation” (303). The doctors would have rather Walt receive an implant to “alleviate” his transness rather than allow him to keep his trans identity and pursue medical transition that would make him feel more comfortable in his body. For the doctors, this is a matter of convenience. For Walt, this is a matter of existence. The implant that the doctors insist would make his life easier would also erase his sense of self.

The neurobiological behavioral modification implants are more than an inventive plot device in a science fiction short story. They are Williams-Childs's imagined futuristic form of conversion therapy. Conversion therapy has been used in the U.S. for over a century to try to change the sexual orientations, gender identities, or gender expressions of LGBTQ+ people. A 2018 report by the Williams Institute estimates that 698,000 LGBTQ+ adults between the ages of 18 and 49 in the U.S. have received conversion therapy, even though conversion therapy has been proven to be ineffective and even harmful (Mallory et al. 1). The American Psychological Association has found that conversion therapy can lead to depression, anxiety, shame, substance abuse, low self-esteem, suicide, and a host of other issues (Glassgold et al. 41-42). According to the Human Rights Campaign, “every major medical and mental health organization in the United States has issued a statement condemning the use of conversion therapy,” but in 35 states, including Tennessee, conversion therapy for minors is still legal and still practiced (Movement Advancement Project). The Williams Institute estimates that 20,000 LGBTQ+ children who live in these states will receive conversion therapy, a process that could subject them to abuse and harm, that could try to eliminate who they truly are, all in an attempt to socially engineer normality.

The neurobiological implants are devices that are thought to be “humane” and medically sound, but they would erase any behavior that differs from the cisgender norm. They also would erase any behavior that is not neurotypical, like the stimming or speech patterns that are part of Walt’s autism. In discussing how the implants could erase not only Walt’s transness, but his autism as well, Williams-Childs also seems to be criticizing the pathologizing of both identities, and the therapies and treatments that attempt to make autistic people act more “normal.” Unfortunately, many autistic people are taught that they need to learn how to “overcome” their autistic behaviors such as stimming or avoiding eye contact in order to conform and be accepted into society. The Autistic Self Advocacy Network opposes the use of behavioral programs that focus on normalization and states that “autistic children should not have to grow up constantly being told that their natural behaviors are wrong and that they cannot be accepted as they are” (ASAN). Walt’s autism, and the behaviors that come with it, are part of his identity, and he knows that he does not want an implant to change that.

The intersection of trans studies and disability studies are not limited to the scope of Walt’s story. In fact, this thesis has been influenced by the ideas of disability studies from its inception. On the Autism Self Advocacy Network’s website, there is a large banner across each page that declares “Nothing About Us Without Us,” a phrase coined by disability rights activist James Charlton. The statement asserts that members of a marginalized group should be involved in conversations about them, whether that is in policy, medicine, or media. In the rethinking of trans representation, I have drawn on the ideas of “Nothing About Us Without Us” in my assertion that trans creators should have agency and be involved in the telling of trans stories. When this mantra is followed, the result can be stories like “Schwaberow, Ohio” where the pathologizing of both disability and transness can be addressed from a disabled, trans perspective.

By presenting us with a future where technology could be used to make people “normal” and telling the story from the perspective of someone whose identities are pathologized, Williams-Childs forces us to question how we define “normal” and “abnormal.” The doctors and their technology in “Schwaberow, Ohio” seem to suggest that being normal means being neurotypical and cisgender, but Walt’s refusal to let himself be altered makes it clear that his autism and transness *are normal for him*. These are the aspects of himself that make him who he is, and he does not want to live without them, even if it would be “easier.” When Walt overhears his aunt planning to get one of the implants for him, he is determined to escape, to continue to exist as himself. He knows that his existence as an autistic trans man is not wrong, despite how often he is told that it is. “I know what it looks like to hurt someone. It doesn’t usually look like just existing” (Williams-Childs 308). Walt’s aunt acts as if his existence, his autism, his transness, is hurting her. When Walt decides to run away, he considers leaving a note that says “I didn’t want to hurt you with my existence” but he knows it would be a lie. “I’m leaving because I don’t want to hurt myself by living in this place anymore.” Walt tells us. “I’m not going to be minimized. I’m going to be. Just not here” (Williams-Childs 310). Walt is leaving his home so he can continue to be who he is.

“Schwaberow, Ohio” does not end on as hopeful a note as *Her Story* did, but it is not a tragedy either. Even though Walt’s world seems bleak, even though doctors and politicians and even his own family members want to erase him, Walt refuses to be erased. He escapes a home that was hurting him, and although his future is uncertain, he is free, and he is resilient. In the Afterword of *Meanwhile, Elsewhere*, Fitzpatrick and Plett tell us that these stories are about redefining what it means to save the world. “Throughout this book we follow transgender people in fantastical, strange, often brutally difficult and unpredictable circumstances *not* redeeming a universe, not heroically and single-handedly rescuing the masses... but carving out small pockets

of knowledge, strength, and survival” (Fitzpatrick and Plett 440). Walt’s story is one of survival, of knowing oneself, and of refusing to be erased. It is a story many trans people have come to know very well, by simply existing as themselves.

The Role of the Internet

The internet played a critical role in the creation and distribution of these three stories. *Her Story* found its home on YouTube, but even before the web series came out, the internet facilitated the creation of the project. The cast and crew of *Her Story* started a campaign on Indiegogo, a crowdfunding website, in August of 2015, in order to raise money for post-production costs, including editing, sound, music, and publicity. In their promotional video for the campaign, Richards stressed how important it was for people to use social media to spread the word about the project, even if they could not donate. The campaign ended up exceeding its goal and raised \$37,875 with the help of 616 backers. The online crowdfunding campaign and the outpouring of support from the online LGBTQ community was critical in releasing *Her Story*.

Grease Bats originally found its home on the website *Autostraddle*, where it has been free for all readers. By posting their comics online, artist Archie Bongiovanni was able to build enough of an audience that they will soon be publishing a *Grease Bats* graphic novel through Boom! Studios next year (*The Beat*). By making their comic available in bookstores, Bongiovanni may be able to reach a wider audience, while the original comics that they have shared online will still be available to trans readers who may not be able to afford to buy the book. Conversely, the publishers of *Meanwhile, Elsewhere* have increased access to their book by encouraging those who purchase the physical anthology to copy and share the stories online (as long as it is not for commercial use). On the copyright page of *Meanwhile, Elsewhere*, the publishers state that all

text in the anthology is released under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share-A-like 4.0 Unported (CC BY-SA 4.0) license, and that “part or all of this book may be reproduced, transmitted or distributed in any form, by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system without the prior written permission of the copyright owner within the guidelines of the license” (Fitzpatrick and Plett). Making the book open-access and available “at no cost to readers around the globe and beyond” was one of the goals of Topside Press’s crowdfunding campaign for *Meanwhile, Elsewhere*. The original \$12,000 goal was raised through the Topside Press website, and was also used to cover author fees, R&D costs, the design and production of the paperback book. Like *Her Story*, money raised by an online community enabled the release of *Meanwhile, Elsewhere*.

The internet has become a great platform for the trans community to share their stories. Unfortunately, however, that platform is now threatened. YouTube has been facing criticism for categorizing age-appropriate videos about queer and trans identity as “mature,” making them unavailable to view in restricted mode (Human Rights Watch). This could make it even more difficult for young transgender people with controlling parents to find videos about trans people like them. LGBTQ+ content creators have also had their videos demonetized, meaning that they have lost approval to run ads on their videos, ads which could generate revenue for these creators. YouTube’s algorithm seems to be directly targeting videos that mention transgender issues. According to *The Daily Beast*, trans vlogger Chase Ross discovered this when he decided to change the title of one of his videos that had previously been approved for monetization to include the phrase “FTM TRANSGENDER,” and his video was immediately demonetized. Ross told *The Daily Beast*, “I feel like trans people and other people under the LGBT umbrella are getting their videos demonetized because they don’t follow the straight, white way of life” (*The*

Daily Beast). Although creators can appeal to have their videos manually reviewed and approved, the fact that YouTube's algorithm still seems to be restricting LGBTQ+ content is concerning.

YouTube is not the only platform that seems to be restricting the voices of trans creators. The blogging platform Tumblr, which has been popular amongst queer and trans artists, began removing all "adult" content, including content that contains nudity, on December 17, 2018. This has negatively affected trans people, and trans creators, who use the site. Before the ban on adult content, Tumblr had been a site where queer and trans artists could share stories and art involving trans bodies that did not paint them as perverted or shameful, and provided an alternative to the cisheteronormative images of the mainstream. In an opinion piece for *Them*, Serena Daniari wrote, "It was while scrolling through Tumblr that I first saw trans bodies actually being celebrated, instead of degraded. I was finally able to see women with penises, men with vaginas, and nonbinary people of all body types without the fetishistic lens that is so often placed upon us in erotic media" (*them.us*). Restricting this content is not only reinforcing ideas about shame onto trans bodies. It is also robbing trans creators of a space to share their content. Non-binary artist faun-songs, who created beautiful artwork that celebrated trans bodies, was forced to take down several pieces of their artwork because they contained nudity. Another trans artist, Al Nuen, hosted his comic *Transformed!* on Tumblr. The fantasy comic centered around a closeted trans man, but since Tumblr's new policy was announced, Nuen has put up an announcement the comic may have to move to a new site, and it does not appear to have updated since.

Now more than ever, it is important to support these trans creators, by watching, reading, and sharing their work. Supporting trans created projects financially, either through crowdfunding campaigns, donating to them directly, or purchasing their work, can also help trans creators

produce more content. Even if you cannot support these projects financially, you can share them with others and raise awareness that these stories are out there. It is also important to actively seek out the work of trans creators. One good website to use is the queer cartoonist database, which allows you to search for trans creators and often provides links to the content they create. Transgender creators are out there, and they have been telling their stories for a long, long time. They may not have the “legitimacy” that comes from being produced by a big budget studio, but that does not make their stories any less valuable. The trans community and its allies need to support these stories and amplify the voices of trans creators.

Conclusion

This thesis aims to examine trans stories by trans creators and illuminate how trans agency in storytelling can produce fiction with diversity, intersectionality, and a nuanced discussion of various issues as well as to explore how trans creators provide new and hopeful images of trans lives and trans futures. Of course, the stories included here are just three of the thousands and thousands of trans produced stories that exist on the internet and beyond, and they cannot come close to representing the perspectives and creations of *all* trans creators. In fact, that is exactly the point. As stated before, there is no “true” trans story. These stories represent only part of the diversity of trans experience, the variety of issues that can impact trans lives, and unlimited and unrestrained imaginations of trans creators.

The characters represented in these stories are diverse in both their experiences and identities. In this selection of stories, there are trans women, trans men, and a genderqueer character. Andy and Ari from *Grease Bats* and Paige from *Her Story* are all trans people of color. While the racial identities of these characters are important, they are not explored in depth as much as other factors of their identities, such as their genders, sexualities, abilities. Even though characters of color were included in these stories, it should be acknowledged that the writers of these stories were all white. I do not want readers to mistakenly interpret the lack of inclusion of trans creators of color in this project to mean that there are no trans creators of color producing content. Rather it is a limitation of the scope of my thesis. More research focusing on

the diversity of creators should be pursued, as there is an ample number of stories by trans creators of color that explore the intersection of race and gender.

While the intersections between race and gender were represented but not highlighted in this selection of stories, the intersections between gender and ability were explored in both *Grease Bats* and “Schawbero, Ohio.” Through Andy, *Grease Bats* explored how mental illness affected Andy as a trans person, as well as how their genderqueer identity, and society’s lack of acceptance of it, compounded their anxiety and depression. In “Schawbero, Ohio,” Williams-Childs examined how programs meant to “normalize” people are used against trans and neurodivergent people who fall outside of what is considered “normal” by society. Through Walt, Williams-Childs showed how this push for assimilation attempts to erase autistic and trans identity and linked the two as inextricable from Walt’s character.

Creators also used these stories to explore social issues that are not often explored in the mainstream. Bongiovanni tackled misgendering in their comic, an issue that many trans people face, but that non-binary and genderqueer people are more often to fall victim to because of the lack of widespread use of they/them pronouns or acknowledgement of non-binary gender identity. *Her Story* also addressed several issues that can impact trans women that are often ignored in mainstream stories told about them. One was the intersection between gender and sexuality, which both Violet and Allie struggled with as they tried to navigate their relationship and understand how their attractions could (or could not) complicate their identities. Related to this topic was transphobia within the LGBTQ+ community, as displayed by Allie’s friends when they tried to convince her that dating Violet would invalidate her lesbian identity. Transphobia in the police force was also addressed, as it plays a part in the lack of support for transgender victims of domestic violence.

Although these stories explored some very difficult topics, they were not tragedies. Violet breaks out of a controlling, abusive relationship to pursue her own love story. Andy is helped through their depression and anxiety with the help of a community that accepts and supports him. Walt continues to have resilience and love for himself despite others' attempts to erase who he is. These creators wrote hope into their stories by showing that their characters can overcome and thrive, even in a world that is seemingly against them. They give hope to their trans audiences by showing them futures where they can be loved, where they can be surrounded by community, where they can have pride in who they are.

Representation is powerful. There is a power in being seen. There is a power in seeing *yourself* in a fictional character. There is a power in seeing someone like *you* be a hero, be strong, be complicated, be admired. There is a power in seeing someone like you struggle and fight, and to see them come out of that bad situation okay; better, even. There is a power in seeing yourself as something other than a joke or a villain or a tragic figure. There is a power there, a power that allows transgender people to dream beyond the hopeless tragedies they have so often been written into. But for this power to be realized, we need to push the boundaries of representation beyond the recycled, one-dimensional narratives, and empower transgender creators to have agency in the stories told about them.

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