The History of Trans Representation in American Television and Film Genres

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CHAPTER 1

The Presumption of Progress

The science fiction series' first episode introduces a trans[1] woman having joyous sex with her girlfriend as they prepare for San Francisco's pride parade (*Sense8*, 2015, Netflix, S01, Ep1). In the sitcom's pilot, a trans woman enters the room to audible gasps as the camera pans to each character's reaction shot. She giggles nervously, "I've had a little work done. Listen, I know I should have called you" (*The Comedians*, FX, 2015, S01, Ep1). In its season finale, a cheeky teen drama reveals that the psychotic tormentor of the primary characters is "Charles," the former older brother of their previous "queen bee," who has infiltrated their friend group as Charlotte (*Pretty Little Liars*, Freeform, 2015, S06, Ep10). A group of teens surround a trans girl in this long-running crime procedural, taunting and misgendering her before a physical struggle pushes her off a bridge (*Law & Order: SVU*, NBC, 2015, S17, Ep3). She later dies of her injuries.

These televisual examples all reached U.S. audiences in 2015, a year after *Time* magazine claimed America was in the middle of a "transgender revolution" of visibility, thanks in large part to popular culture's "radical increase in trans consciousness" (Steinmetz and Gray 44). The article highlights the series *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013–2019) and its trans female actor and rights activist Laverne Cox, now "a sought-after celebrity" (Steinmetz and Gray 44). To debut Caitlyn Jenner's female

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identity, a 2015 *Vanity Fair* article similarly argues, "enormous strides are being made today in the acceptance of transgender women and men" due to scripted television series like *OITNB* and *Transparent* (Amazon, 2014–2019) (Bissinger). These articles position trans visibility in U.S. popular culture as relatively new and presume it has positively shifted the cis society's acceptance of the trans community.

My opening examples, though, take issue with this presumption. "Trans visibility" in scripted televisual media varies greatly between *Sense8*, which depicts a trans lesbian whose female identity is unquestioned in the narrative and played by a trans female actor, and *The Comedians*, where a trans woman's physiological and social transition is played for laughs by startling her previous co-workers—and the audience—with the visual image of a cis male actor in a dress and makeup. The suspenseful reveal of Charlotte's identity on *Pretty Little Liars* is similarly as reductive and harmful to trans civil rights as the transphobic hate crime on *Law & Order: SVU*. To make sense of these examples, this book argues the necessity of analyzing trans representations, including the overwhelming focus on trans women versus trans men and gender nonconforming persons, in a wider context and on a continuum with representations from earlier decades. While mainstream fictional trans representations in American popular culture have certainly increased in veracity and variety over time, *The History of Trans Representation in American Television and Film Genres* takes as its premise that they continue to present limited and harmful characterizations that reaffirm cisgender superiority for a cisgender audience.

Televisual popular culture has, since the 1960s, consistently provided the cisgender mainstream with trans subjects meant to be seen *as* trans, their difference identified as *not* cis, *not* "normal," *not* acceptable. Disciplinary power over gender boundaries, Michel Foucault has argued, by the government, by the medical community, and by individuals, relies upon such visibility: "it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them" (qtd. in Beauchamp 15). In short, only after difference is identified and defined—homo/heterosexuality, cis/transgender—can boundaries be regulated and categories normalized. Following the work of trans studies scholars Gayle Salamon, Dean Spade, and Toby Beauchamp who utilize this Foucauldian perspective, my book claims that the evolution of fictional trans representations has, with a few notable exceptions, maintained a cisnormativity that in turn naturalizes the male/female binary and justifies

cisgender privilege. My lens, then, does not attempt to gauge the veracity of transgender media representations per se, since, as Andre Cavalcante's ethnographic study points out, trans individuals may find affirmation, "comfort, communion, and glimmers of self-recognition" in even "well-worn clichés and stereotypes" (15). Moreover, as a cis person, I cannot and should not dispute the significance of any trans representations in the media for the trans audience. Instead, I demonstrate why positive and varied representations of trans identities in mass media are not just *necessary* for cisgender awareness of the trans community, as other scholars contend, but are also *beneficial* to cisgender audiences as they dismantle sexist, racist, and classist hierarchies that also negatively affect cis identities (Gillig, et al.).

This book is not so much about transgender *identities* as it is about trans*phobic representations*—those fictionalized characterizations which maintain a cis/trans or male/female binary and normalize the equation of sex with gender, female with feminine, and male with masculine. As Richard Dyer argues about gay and lesbian media representations, identifying and rejecting negative stereotypes is not enough since "doing so does not make the stereotypes go away, and tends to prevent us from understanding just what stereotypes are, how they function, ideologically and aesthetically, and why they are so resilient" ("Stereotyping" 353). Heeding Dyer's warning and following Talia Mae Bettcher's analysis of transphobic media (249–251), I also elucidate transphobia's machinations by clarifying its false assumptions about cisnormativity and exposing the continuum between, for example, *Law & Order: SVU*'s inevitable victimization and *Pretty Little Liars'* violent sociopathy, rather than presume the latter is more harmful.

To do so, this book contrasts representations by genre, as I did in the first paragraph. Genre, as film and television scholars have explained, integrates audience expectations and values with "Hollywood's ideological ones," so genres are "situated within larger systems of power and, thus, come 'fully loaded' with political implications" (Altman 15; Mittell 27). While I focus on fictional televisual narratives that share elements and cultural associations, generic-specific elements shift the framing and presentation of the trans character in two key ways: first, on how and if the character's gender identity is authenticated, and second, on the interrelation between their physiological and/or social transition and their relationship(s) with other (cis) characters, who stand-in for cisgender society. In fact, without including genre in the analysis, as Dyer has argued,

"we don't really understand why [stereotypes] turn out the way they do" (*Matter* 2).

Unlike the majority of trans media scholarship, my analysis moves beyond main characters, like Nomi Marks, the trans lesbian in *Sense8*, or the main character in the historic drama *The Danish Girl* (Hopper), also released in 2015. Certain protagonists receive the lion's share of analysis, whether found in film, like *Boys Don't Cry* (Peirce, 1999), *Transamerica* (Tucker, 2005) or *Dallas Buyers Club* (Vallée, 2015), or television, particularly *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013–2019), *Sense 8* (Netflix, 2015–2018), *Transparent* (Amazon, 2014–2019), *Glee* (Fox, 2009–2015), and *Degrassi: New Generation* (Teen Nick, 2001–2015) (Abbott; Malatino; Villarejo; Yep, et al.; Keegan, "Moving" and *Lana*). Similarly, generic media scholarship relies on the same trans identities which narrows analysis to horror villains, starting with *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), and comedic cross-dressing male protagonists, such as *Tootsie* (Pollack, 1982) and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Columbus, 1993), who do not fit what today is considered a trans identity (L. Miller; Phillips; Garber).[2] I do not ignore such impactful representations, of course, but contextualize them using "cross-textual seriality" in order to include guest and minor characters. The term is Joe Wlodarz's and has been useful to other queer scholars to specify the "developmental narrative" or progression of representation of a specific minority group (91; Pullen, *Straight*; Kessler; Garber; Sandercock). This progression requires close attention to which characteristics are repeated, which subgroups (e.g. black versus white trans women) occur more frequently, and how the character functions within the genre's established conventions. My approach will thus explain, for instance, how film and television minor and guest characters keep the trans killer stereotype in play in the 1970s and '80s during the gap between *Psycho* and its film successors, *Dressed to Kill* (De Palma, 1980) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991).

This longer, wider view takes into account genre and minor characters without discounting how ground-breaking shifts resonate through the decades, such as the heterosexual romance and wedding of the first regular trans feminine character in network television in *All That Glitters* (Syn., 1977, S01, Ep65) to the same-sex wedding with a regular trans feminine character, again Nomi from *Sense8* (Netflix, 2018, S02, Ep12). At the same time, my analysis complicates the inherent assumption that cultural and political progress is inevitable. Chapters 6 and 7, for instance, show that trans victims, who have increased in proportion to the decrease of

trans criminals, do not necessarily validate trans identities better than psychotic killers. In making this case, I am indebted to other queer media studies scholars who interrogate the liberatory presumption of greater media visibility by examining not only what identities are missing, but also how those present valorize the dominance of other identity categories, such as whiteness, masculinity, and middle-class citizenship (Becker, *Gay*; Brady, Burns, and Davies; Kohnen). I also follow the work of other media scholars like Raquel J. Gates who contest the boundaries between positive and negative identity representations and reject the notion that certain genres, like independent film dramas, are more impactful than clichéd studio comedies or crime procedurals. The mainstream films and series I analyze in this book not only reach wider audiences, but also function as an interdependent web of production which replicates successful clichés and innovates by combining genres rather than altering these stereotypes.

Transphobia, Homophobia, and Trans Representations

Both *Time* magazine's 2014 "Transgender Tipping Point" article and *Vanity Fair*'s 2015 profile of Caitlyn Jenner acknowledge the inherent contradiction that trans scholar micha cárdenas states so succinctly: "trans people appear to be winning a struggle for visibility while also continuing to be murdered on a daily basis" (Steinmetz and Gray 44–45; Bissinger; 170). Yet these mainstream media articles are ultimately optimistic in contrast to the work of many trans studies scholars, like Morgan M. Page, who believes that media visibility is intrinsically connected to "increased levels of physical and legislative violence against" the trans community (143). At the writing of this book, examples of legal discrimination include the ban on trans personnel in the military, the federal denial of safe housing and medical treatment for trans inmates and detainees, and the reduction of protections for K-12 trans students under Title IX, not to mention a slew of state legislative bills. Increased violence against the trans community includes murder rates: anti-LGBTQ homicides were higher in 2017 than either 2015 and 2016, according to the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (Waters et al. 5).

Putting statistics aside, let's return to the transphobic mob violence in *Law & Order: SVU* when a group of cisgender teens verbally and physically harass a trans female teen, ultimately causing her to fall off a bridge and later die of her injuries. This episode is one of three from 2015 to 2018 with a trans feminine murder victim, an expected outcome in a

television franchise with a reputation for fictionalizing "ripped from the headline" cases. Like filmic versions of real-life transphobic murders (e.g. *Boys Don't Cry*, Peirce, 1999; *Soldier's Girl*, Showtime, Pierson, 2003; *A Girl Like Me: The Gwen Araujo Story*, Holland, 2006), such episodes can be commended for creating empathy for trans victims. The latter film confirms actual crime statistics, as trans feminine persons are more likely to be murdered, up to four times higher than their cisgender counterparts, according to the Human Rights Campaign (Lee 33). A genre analysis across the decades, though, tells a different story about the function of trans characters in crime storylines, even if I stay focused only on the *Law & Order* franchise (NBC) from 2000–2018. 16 of the 18 trans characters are trans feminine, but only five are murder victims, including these recent examples. Yet unlike this trans teen, who is attacked by strangers, these other cases are framed as the result of the woman's romantic or sexual relationship with a cisgender man (*Law & Order: SVU*, 2002, S03, Ep 23; *Law & Order: Trial by Jury*, 2005, S01, Ep12; *Law & Order: SVU*, 2016, S18, Ep6; *Law & Order: SVU*, 2018, S20, Ep10). Given the necessary dramatic arc for each episode's investigation, it is also perhaps unsurprising that 7 of the 18 are also presumed suspects, and three turn out to be murderers (*Law & Order: SVU*, 2003, S04, Ep21; *Law & Order*, 2004, S14, Ep17; *Law & Order: SVU*, 2009, S10, Ep14).[3] It is especially significant that even though the majority of trans feminine victims in reality are women of color, mostly African American, the majority of *Law & Order*'s victims are white or Asian American (Lee 34; Waters et al. 7). When *Law & Order* does include black trans women, most are sex workers who show up briefly as witnesses, and the others are either criminals or suspects. In fact, close to 40% of the franchise's trans feminine characters are sex workers, including two non-black victims, a profession the series usually frames as a moral, not economic, choice. Given this closer review, should *Law & Order*, then, still be commended for creating empathy for victims of transphobic violence?

As this brief analysis also demonstrates, trans representations do not merely confirm cis superiority but also engage in hierarchical differentials based on gender, race, and class, an intersectional puzzle that helps explain why the death of a middle-class white teen pushed off a bridge by strangers (*Law & Order: SVU*, NBC, 2015, S17, Ep3) is framed as more tragic than an Asian American teen sex worker murdered by her customer (*Law & Order: SVU*, 2018, S20, Ep10).[4] My analysis of such televisual moments is indebted to queer scholars who similarly have unpacked such hierarchies

for LGBQ representations by evaluating "homonormativity," the concept that except for their sexual identity, LGBQ characters are as "normal" as other Americans—as white, as gender conforming, as middle-class, etc. (Cortvriend; Kohnen; Martin; Ng). This validation of normativity, in other words, has a disciplinary purpose, further punishing those unable or unwilling to fit cultural expectations or values and in turn rarely questioning male, white, or wealth privilege (Stodolka 417). This is an unsurprising result when white gay men dominate representations of the LGBTQ community on television (GLAAD 9, 14). Trans studies adapted the concept as "transnormativity" to elucidate the same narrow construction of acceptable trans identities, in order to, in Evan Vipond's words, "convince cisnormative society that they are 'just like them,' … [by] upholding the sex and gender binary" ("Resisting" 24). Trans media scholars have applied such concepts to successfully expose the racist, classist, and ageist assumptions that uphold transnormativity as well (Hollis; McIntyre; Sandercock).

It is crucial, though, to highlight that homonormativity is also a tool of transphobia since by definition it "exclude[s] transgender individuals and make[s] them appear more deviant in the process" (George 567). This viewpoint is borne out in studies that document how American heterosexuals' acceptance of gays and lesbians does not correlate to trans acceptance (Mathers, Sumerau, and Cragun; Garelick, et al.). Granted, the trans and LGBQ community are targeted under similar presumptions that, for instance, gender and sexual identity are personal choices or threats that destabilize heteronormative values, and, moreover, cis people may be victimized for gender nonconformity.[5] But, as Doug Meyer documents in *Violence Against Queer People* (2015), violence against trans individuals is "explicitly more dehumanizing than anti-lesbian and antigay violence" since perpetrators use pejorative language to frame the trans victim as an "'it,' depriving them of human qualities" (35).

Recent legal arguments are useful to show the conceptual nuances of such prejudice. The lawyer for Jack Phillips, the Colorado baker whose right to refuse service to a gay couple was upheld by the Supreme Court in June 2018, claims that "Jack serves all customers; he simply declines to express messages or celebrate events that violate his deeply held beliefs" (De Vogue). In this way, the denial of LGBQ equal rights is conceptualized as a religious right of self-determination by the heterosexual individual to accept the person but reject the "sin," a "love the sinner, hate the sin" rationale that frames validation of one person's *relationship* as a threat

to another's ability to adhere to their religious faith. "Religious refusal and relationship recognition" legislation was one of the most proposed and passed categories of anti-LGBTQ state laws in 2018 (Warbelow, Oakley and Kutney 7, 29). In contrast, in 2016 a judge in Georgia denied a trans man's petition to change his name by asserting, "name changes which allow a person to assume the role of a person of the opposite sex are, in effect, a type of fraud on the general public" and therefore are "dangerous" (Redden). This rhetoric denies his *personhood*, a "hate the sinner, hate the sin" perception that rejects a trans person's right to *exist*.[6] Georgia and 17 other states in 2017 and 2018 have proposed bills to ban health coverage for trans-related treatment through Medicaid and private insurance or for trans youth with this perspective, as well as make legal identification changes more difficult (Warbelow, Oakley and Kutney 21–22). Indeed, rather than perceive gender identity as an inherent and autonomous right against the authority of the state to define the conditions of one's personhood, which fits Republican and particularly libertarian rhetoric, the trans community is conceived as a literal threat to cisgender *individuals* due to their alleged desire to assume a gender that is not their own and then invade sex-segregated physical spaces. Traces of this view can be found across scripted series that claim trans people are a threat *just by existing*: during this 2015 *Law & Order: SVU* episode, the psychologist at the trial of the main perpetrator argues that the trans girl's gender identity compelled him to react with violence: "[she] was someone very different from the biological boys Darius knows … in ways that were threatening to a boy just beginning to mature sexually and emotionally…. He was flooded with fear and the need to show his peers that he was a straight—a 'real'—man" (NBC, S17, Ep3). This example indicates that the trans psychotic murderers like Charlotte Drake on *Pretty Little Liars* are hardly perceived as the only trans threat to cisgender society (Freeform, 2015, S06, Ep10).

Trans Media Studies and Trans Representations

The trans girl in the aforementioned *Law & Order: SVU* episode exemplifies the interrelated threads of homophobia and sexism within transphobia, since her gender identity, not her sexual orientation (which is never identified), "threatens" the heterosexual teenage boy who murders her, as he is compelled, according to the criminal psychologist, by his inability to assess his interpersonal role vis-à-vis a person who is both a girl and "not" a girl. Transgender studies thus situates its distinction as a field between

gender studies and queer studies thanks to seminal scholars like Paisley Currah, Susan Stryker, A. Finn Enke, Jamison Green, and Aaron H. Devor.[7] Certain aspects of trans identity or experience, as some recent scholars have argued, are overlooked or undervalued when trans subjects are examined from a queer media studies perspective (Fischer; Martínez-San Miguel and Tobias; Snorton). For example, trans media scholars in scripted narratives have argued that the "coming out" model often utilized to analyze LGBQ characters fails to transfer neatly onto trans characters even in series with queer characters like *Glee, Degrassi: The Next Generation, The L Word* and *Orange is the New Black* (Beirne; Yep, et al.; Vipond, "100%;" Malatino).[8] Moreover, the sequentiality of a transition narrative privileges the physical transformation above all else, but even without centering the trans character's "journey," the story arc is still so focused on the physicality of the trans character that dramatic events and tension are often constructed around the status of their genitals, as seen in even late 2010s examples like *Rise* (NBC, 2018, S01, Ep4), *Law & Order: SVU* (NBC, 2018, S19, Ep18), *3 Generations* (Dellal, 2017) and *Anything* (McNeil, 2017) (for more examples, see Keegan, "Moving;" Poole; Abbott). In the same way, feminist studies, with its close attention to the relationship between a naturalized gender binary and patriarchal oppression, is integral to trans media analysis. Like other trans media scholars, I believe sexism cannot be dismantled without confronting transphobia, since representations build upon other sexist and homophobic assumptions, such as the sexual double standard, gender essentialism, femmephobia, and the valorization of procreative sex (Abelson; Fischer; Hines; Horak, "Trans"). Many fictional trans representations, for example, perpetuate the notion of an effortless cis gender identity and expression, which occurs even when cis female actors[9] play trans feminine characters, a casting choice that has been less common than those with cis male actors, as in my earlier examples.

Two mid-2000s films easily show how this dichotomy of female expression works. Felicity Huffman and Sofia Vergara play female transsexuals in *Transamerica* (Tucker, 2005) and *Grilled* (Ensler, 2006), yet the character's gender expression is atypical of the actor's usual glamorized, hyperfeminine appearance, which is evident in the roles that made them stars, Huffman on *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004–2012) and Vergara on *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009–2020). The films masculinize their gender expression with a lack of makeup, sexualized clothing, and other feminine physical markers, like a high voice. Ironically, though, their cis roles'

feminine gender expression is more challenging to achieve, due to the combined cost of professional makeup artists, hair stylists, cosmetic surgery, fashion and exercise consultants, etc. Yet only the former roles are presented as inauthentically feminine in comparison to the cis female characters *and* each actor's "naturally" feminine appearance. This masculinized version, in fact, is meant to invalidate them as potential heterosexual partners for cisgender straight men within the storyline. Chapter 2 addresses how racial identity also impacts cisnormative standards, since trans feminine roles with white women like Huffman or light-complexion Latinas like Vergara are hypermasculinized in a way that many black women in trans feminine roles are not, since their racialized features, particularly their complexion and physicality, are enhanced as a stand-in for masculinization. An intersectional feminist lens, then, reveals how trans feminine characters maintain sexist, homophobic, *and* racist hierarchies.

The fact that both characters are heterosexual also demonstrates my need to combine feminist media studies with queer media studies. I certainly appreciate queer media scholarship, like Samuel Chambers', that mines scripted film and television for a queerness "that resists and subverts normative heterosexuality," and, like Tison Pugh's, reveals how certain characters and scenarios can disrupt the "gendered and (hetero)sexual normativity ostensibly encoded within these" narratives (21; 4). At the same time, the non-normative sexual and gender identity of some queer characters, particularly drag queens but also queer transsexuals, makes them useful for a variety of queer studies media analysis. In short, sometimes their atypical gender identity is more relevant to the character's function, as Quinlan Miller similarly asserts about the "queer gender" of certain sitcom characters in the 1950s and 60s (8).

As Miller's book indicates, the boundary between cis and trans is also porous, due to both shifting definitions and gender's complexity as an identity or in expression. For example, trans feminine characters who have already medically or socially transitioned consistently are defined onscreen as "transvestites," even in the 2000s.[10] Other times, a feminine-presenting person with male physiological attributes is defined this way regardless of the situation.[11] LGBTQ identities are also often tracked together in scholarship (Tropiano; Capsuto; Benshoff and Griffin), advocacy (GLAAD), and popular blogs like Wikipedia (e.g. "List of Films with LGBT Characters") and LezWatchTV, and often include as trans or genderqueer those who typically still identify with their assigned sex, like drag queens and kings, or do not utilize overtly visible gender changes (Singer

259–260). "Transgender" is meant to be an inclusive umbrella term so covers a range of identities, from cross-dressers who may be another gender "part-time" and transsexuals who fit the conventional assumption regarding those who change their "sex" to other genderqueer people who identify outside of the two gender system. Any of these identities, in turn, may or may not utilize a range of medical treatments to change their physiology. As a result, even trans-only articles with historical lists (Anderson; Bernhard; Halterman) or aggregate sites, like Tiffany Michelle's "Tiffany's TG Movie Guide," are not aligned in their definitions, and unfortunately, many use sources, particularly the International Movie Database, with inaccurate, outdated, and even pejorative terms.[12]

I have therefore viewed as many of these narratives as possible, including through multiple visits to the Library of Congress Moving Image Research Center, and have provided a chronological list of trans characters as well as drag performers and female imposters in American film and television as Appendix B. I include drag identities since I believe that televisual media contributed to the confusion between drag, cross-dressing, and transsexuality in order to deauthenticate a feminine identity or expression of any person assigned male at birth. While my own definitions will no doubt be disputed by future scholars, updated with better access and information or outdated by new practices, this chronology should enable more media scholars to address trans representations in their work or move beyond commonly referenced examples.[13]

The Presumption of Progress

Chapter 2 first addresses the historical context that makes white trans feminine characters the most prominent trans identity in American popular media for the last 50 years. This trend not only privileges feminine identities over masculine ones but also promotes gender-normative feminine expression and behavior within a specifically racialized (white) and classed (middle-class) context. Recent trans scholarship is therefore useful to explain how the media emphasis on transnormativity can also be understood as a surveillance tool (Beauchamp; Fischer). Such apparatuses have, since the formation of the United States, defined and regulated normative gender roles by claiming its necessity for a productive citizenry and secure state (Gossett). Transnormativity was promoted as well by the first cisgender medical experts on "transgenderism" and the first transgender celebrities, but this chapter explains how televisual media became less and less

interested in differentiating between transsexuality and cross-dressing, turning instead to an easily dismissible prop of a "man in a dress." The audience, for example, most likely would be unable to distinguish between the transsexual Roberta in *The World According to Garp* (Hill, 1981), the drag queen in *Trapper John, M.D.* (CBS, 1981, S02, Ep6), and the female "imposter" and villain Isadora in the TV mystery movie *Murder Me, Murder You* (CBS, Nelson, 1983) when all are played by cis male actors. The impact of trans civil rights, however, produced more empathetic narratives starting in the 1990s, again using racial and class hierarchies to validate professional white trans women above all others, but often such characterizations continued to present trans bodies as irreconcilable with gender hegemonies. As trans theorists contend, trans embodiment is treated as singularly challenging and ultimately unfulfillable despite relying on the same consumeristic means as cisgendered embodiment and expression (Hughes; Salamon).

I build upon these theories to assert in Chap. 2 that the transnormative model is crucial to the role physical embodiment plays in televisual representations of trans identities. As more and more trans protagonists appeared in the twenty-first century, trans bodies remain the site of trans identity due to transnormativity's medical model of transition, but now their inability to achieve equality with cis society is attributed to their gender dysphoria rather than cisnormativity. More recently, the common practice of casting a cis actor as a trans character, known as "transface," has generated controversy, but I demonstrate that the presence of a trans actor in a trans role cannot by itself authenticate the trans body since televisual genres still use visual conventions to convey the authenticity of one's gender (Reynolds).

Chapter 3 begins my genre case studies by analyzing how comedic genres treat trans identities as a cisgender "problem." In this chapter I first explain how storylines create tension through gender and sexual identity difference by reviewing scholarship on comedic elements in sitcoms and films (Becker, "Becoming;" Garber; Neale and Krutnik). I then expand this concept by introducing a term, the "cis surprise," which is such a common narrative trope that I examine its iterations both Chaps. 3 and 4. Separating the analysis between two chapters is necessary due to the trope's evolution from a "friend" version, in which the cis main male character reunites with friend from decades before, to a "romantic partner" version, where the cis man expresses romantic interest in a new acquaintance or begins to date her. The "cis surprise" is my alteration of Jeffrey

Escoffier's "tranny surprise," a term he uses to explain the narrative trajectory of pornographic films, in which narrative suspense hinges upon the surprise of the reveal, the moment when the trans woman discloses her gender history,[14] usually by exposing her penis (274). The reveal's narrative purpose, in short, is the moment when "the meaning of the trans body is contested, and competing 'truths' vie for dominance," so that even if the trans person willingly discloses, the narrative asserts a cisnormative "truth" over their self-agency and authenticity (Seid 176). Like its pornographic counterpart, this trope primarily relies upon a cis male main character and a trans feminine guest character who, especially in the latter version, is conventionally attractive. Unlike its pornographic origin, however, the reveal in mainstream comedy is often unexpected and makes a trans character's gender identity either a punchline or crisis in order to privilege the cis character's reaction over the trans character's voiced self-determination, which is only sometimes provided. By substituting "cis" for "trans," I thus shift the onus of the surprise's impact from the trans character to the cis character since they are the person in this exchange who makes this information relevant to the interaction. My term is therefore meant to remind readers that the term relies on a cis/trans dichotomy that does exist but is given a relevance by cisnormativity's stress on its difference, not on its sameness, to trans lives and bodies. I keep "surprise" to retain this scenario's intentionally transphobic purpose, often structured as a narrative climax regardless of whether it is used in a non-sexual (Chap. 3) or sexual (Chap. 4) context. A short comparison of its usage in the following three examples, studied in more detail in these chapters, also demonstrates why genre case study analysis is a necessary tool for narrative cohesion.

Sitcoms originate what I term the "cis surprise" since it extends a trope that had become popularized with gay and lesbian guest characters, the reunion, in which a main majority character is reacquainted with an old friend, colleague, or romantic partner who now identifies differently than they had previously, a subset of the "mistaken identity" scenario familiar to sitcom audiences (Tropiano 212–223). The reunion storyline adds an emotional poignancy regarding whether a relationship is still possible now that the guest character's identity has shifted, so applying concepts from queer theorists, as I explain, elucidates how this tension oscillates between the inherent sameness and difference of sexual identities (Doty; Kessler; Becker, "Becoming"). A comparison of two sitcom examples from different decades, though, also reveals a key difference that

demonstrates why a generic analysis is necessary: sexual tension shifts the stakes considerably in a comedic context, as Chap. 4 asserts, while romantic sex, such as in the medical drama *Chicago Hope* (CBS, 1995, S01, Ep18), pushes the climatic reveal into tragedy. On *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 1977, S04, Ep3), George is reunited with a friend from his Navy enlistment, hypermasculine Dr. Billy Kronk is reunited with his pee wee hockey teammate in *Chicago Hope*, and on *Just Shoot Me!* (NBC, 2000; S05, Ep6), Dennis is reunited with a childhood best friend, who shared his love of skateboarding, comic books, and the series *Kung Fu*. It is not insignificant that each cis male character's relationship with his friend was established within a sex-segregated environment or activities as each cis man believes without this common identity, the meaning of their earlier affection, not just their current friendship, is invalidated. The comedic genre in turn impacts the storyline, the framing of their relationship, and the resolution of this conflict.

As comedies, *The Jeffersons* and *Just Shoot Me!* heighten the comedic elements through misrecognition, so that neither George nor Dennis first believe the beautiful woman before him, given cisgender authenticity with the casting of a cis female actor, could possibly be his old friend, claiming it must be a practical joke. As a drama, *Chicago Hope* extends the mystery of what Annie has to tell Billy about her past after the two run into a plastic surgeon they both know, but she refuses to tell him why even though the two have already begun dating and having sex. Pathos is created in all three by the narrative tension that results when each man's rejects his friend's new identity and with it an ongoing relationship, which is how the trans guest character's identity in a comedic and dramatic context still devolves into a cisgender "problem." As a drama, *Chicago Hope* extends the pathos of Billy's problem for a number of scenes, debating "what" Annie is with first Annie and then a female colleague. In contrast, Dennis' talk with a female colleague convinces him to at least allow Brandi to apologize to him, and they make up by discussing Brandi's breast augmentation, so the audience can titter approvingly when he asks to touch them. George's rejection of Edie, in contrast, creates another humorous situation when he must hire a cis male employee to dress in female attire and impersonate Edie due to Louise's fears of adultery. In the comedic narratives, the problem is only resolved after another cis character considered more morally astute—George's wife Louise and Dennis' colleague Maya—acknowledges her female identity, paving the way for his

acceptance. The resolution, though, prioritizes cisnormative assumptions that her masculine self can never be fully erased, as George's and Dennis's rehabilitated transphobia is dependent on the fact that their friend retains enough masculine qualities to maintain their connection, demonstrated through Edie's physical practical jokes and Brandi's superiority in nerf gun battles and video games.

In contrast, as a drama, *Chicago Hope* provides a poignant scene between the two when Billy attempts a reconciliation, which ultimately fails when he cannot overcome his repulsion, concluding, "I wish you hadn't told me." The pathos does not end here, though, as Annie returns the following season (CBS, 1996, S02, Ep16) to ask Billy for his help due to unexplained abdominal pain and a hormone imbalance, enabling the show to provide another dramatic reveal between the two when her first scene ends as she pulls off the scarf around her face to show significant facial hair. Again, however, his feelings for her, exacerbated by her tumor diagnosis, are rooted in their masculine-defined friendship, since she is shown cheering his violent body checks as he plays hockey. His cis authority again creates a cis problem because she refuses medical treatment, surgery and ending her hormone therapy, as it would remasculinize her body. Her last line, "I won't be a woman. I can't be a man. What am I supposed to do?", is answered when he finds her body in her hospital bathroom, graphically shown from above to emphasize how the blood from her cut wrists has spread across the floor. While Billy's rehabilitated transphobia is only referenced at the start of episode, when he alludes to being a "jerk" to her previously, the tragedy of their unfulfilled romance is now replaced by the tragedy of her death. The generic elements of comedic series like *The Jeffersons* are the focus of Chap. 3, the sexualized version from *Just Shoot Me!* covered in Chap. 4, and tragic romances that end either in the end of the relationship or death like Annie's and Billy's are addressed in Chap. 5.

Chapter 4 elaborates on the cultural shift that occurs once the "cis surprise" romantic scenario becomes popularized due to the rise of sexually explicit television starting in the 1990s, which enables more explicit sexual engagement between cis male characters and trans feminine characters. I use trans scholarship to explain how these representations build upon the pathologization of trans sexuality which starts decades earlier in medical-psychiatric discourse and continues today in diagnoses like "autogynephilia." Predictably, the sexually explicit "surprise" begins first in R-rated films like *Risky Business* (Brinkman, 1983) and *Bachelor Party* (Israel,

1984), two examples I discuss in more detail in this chapter. The first is, like in *Risky Business*, a "romantic partner version," or one in which the cis male character avoids sexual contact and retains his cisgender superiority by rejecting the trans feminine character's romantic overtures when he learns her gender history. This film also uses racial (white/black) and class (middle-/lower-) hierarchies to support the cis/trans binary. In the second, the "cis chaser," again an alteration of a pejorative term for the cisgender male sexual partner of a trans woman, also presents trans sexuality as unequivocally perverse. As in *Bachelor Party*, the reveal occurs *after* sexual relations, so it destabilizes the cis character's heterosexuality, too. Such chasers, like in this film, are often secondary characters whose failed masculinity then highlights the main cis male character' heterosexual prowess. The "cis chaser" extends the legacy of *Myra Breckinridge* (Sarne, 1970), a satirical film which remains influential in American media and bridges the longer history of the trans psychotic criminal with the "cis surprise" sexual predator. Both versions use misrecognition to further ridicule the trans character's gender identity, but the latter has more applicability, often making sexual interaction the premise for scandal or blackmail for the cis male character and sometimes interjecting comedic elements into a dramatic genre.

Romance is the genre case study in Chap. 5, which clarifies why the sexual innuendo and interaction in Chap. 4 are intentionally *un*romantic, since romance is constructed to affirm both partners. Thus, the inclusion of trans characters in this scenario in both television series like *Chicago Hope* (CBS, 1995, S01, Ep18), *Ally McBeal* (Fox, 2000, S04, Ep2–4, 7) and *The Education of Max Bickford* (CBS, 2002, S01, Ep12) and films like *Boys Don't Cry* (Peirce, 1999) and *Soldier's Girl* (Showtime, Pierson, 2003) would seem to suggest that trans fictional representations become substantively better as the 1990s progressed into the new century concurrent with an increased public discourse on transgender rights. Instead, I use feminist media theory to explain how romance can enhance the trans character's autonomy while continuing to privilege the cis character as more significant (Gill; Grodal; Grindon; K. Johnson; Todd). Chapter 5 also integrates queer theory to explain how this progression parallels similar benchmarks in the history of gay and lesbian characters. First, sympathetic depictions were dependent on their complete desexualization, while later relationship rejection and failure became a means to provide a sympathetic narrative without having to investigate the impact of systemic homophobia. Failed relationships continue to occur for heterosexual

couples whether the cis partner is trans male (e.g. *Mistresses*, ABC, 2016, S04, Ep3–5; *The Fosters*, Freeform, 2016, S04) or trans female characters (e.g. *Star*, FX, 2017, S02; *Pose*, FX, 2018, S01), although the latter's popularity over the former continues due to its replication of familiar sexist tropes. Thanks to melodramatic sensibilities, death can also poignantly end a heterosexual relationship while still conveniently preventing a happily-ever-after, like in *Dirty Sexy Money* (ABC, 2008, S02, Ep8) or *The Danish Girl* (Hopper, 2015). The chapter concludes by explaining why cis/trans romance is primarily validated only for same-sex couples in narratives geared towards queer audiences, as happens in *Sense8* (Netflix, 2015, S01) and *Faking It* (MTV, 2016, S03, Ep4–10), but also negates the necessity of affirming the trans character's gender identity.

Finally, Chaps. 6 and 7, building in the analyses from Chap. 4, identifies trans character tropes that cross genres even as the genre shifts the character's function. Chapter 6 is devoted to trans criminality, opening with a section which analyzes the trans psychotic stereotype from the initially one-dimensional female imposter to the more modern version that continues to link transsexuality with personality disorders and violence, such as *Pretty Little Liars'* Charlotte. This chapter also demonstrates that the sexualized components of this characterization are narratively linked with the trans feminine sex worker. The cis main character's expertise in investigative and legal narratives—whether as beat cop, homicide detective, forensic examiner, prosecuting attorney, or private detective—prioritizes their definition of trans identities and determines their social capital. As feminist scholarship has demonstrated, sex work in popular discourse legitimizes male control over female sexuality even as it reveals anxieties over the extent to that control, so I incorporate this theory to explain how trans feminine sex workers function to reaffirm the superiority of cisgender male heterosexuality by continuing the denigration and ridicule found in the sexual "cis surprise" (Carr; Coy, Wakeling and Garner; Lister; Voss). As a result, the recurring trope of the "sassy hooker" has a comedic function, even in dramatic narratives, and in turn exposes her exclusion from positive empowerment tropes available to cisgender sex workers, whether through heteronormative "true love" redemption or savvy economic empowerment (Flanagin). Since fictional trans sex workers are more often women of color, these scenarios, present through the 2010s, continues to maintain the exclusion by race and class of lower-class trans women of color from model citizenship and with it any narrative empathy. Although many of these are minor or even nameless characters, I assert that the

frequency and commonality of this trope create a "developmental narrative" across series and genres, valorizing these harmful stereotypes (Wlodarz 91).

Chapter 7 turns to trans victims, the most recent trans trope historically. The trans victim in crime dramas partly relies upon the same melodramatic sensibilities found in romantic tragedies described in Chap. 5, particularly through sensationalized scenes of violence and a heightened focus on interpersonal factors and relationships. Crime dramas, though, decenter victims based on the structure and ideological purpose of criminal justice narratives, which is another means to validate cisnormative institutions and transgender exclusion. Even when cis characters work in their favor, such as to investigate their deaths in police and crime dramas or advocate for their civil rights in legal or family dramas, the cis character's inadequacy against the system is the focal point of the drama, not the trans character's experience with transphobia.

This chapter therefore integrates feminist and queer media studies of this genre to explain how victimization, whether through physical violence or legal exclusion, is a narrative convention that enables series to appear inclusive of minority identities without having to suggest they are equal to majority characters. This occurs primarily because their tragic demise can often act as an acknowledgement of the intractability of the prejudice against them. As a result, television crime series designate certain identity groups as responsible for their own victimization, validating sexist and homophobic institutional oppression in the process (Lavigne; Foss; Rader, Rhineberger-Dunn, and Vasquez). My analysis of murdered trans victims then integrates a theory from trans studies scholarship, "trans necropolitics," to more carefully explain how the interrelated oppression of social, political, and economic systems creates, justifies, and ultimately exploits trans violent death (Snorton and Haritaworn; Aizura; cárdenas). Moreover, the trans victim's romantic and sexual history is often connected to her violent end, as I noted about the *Law & Order* franchise, which simultaneously validates her as a heterosexual object of desire but then neutralizes her threat to cisnormative heterosexuality. Thus, even though victimization storylines appear more progressive than their criminal predecessors, their death conveniently silences their experience and erases the possibility of systemic change.

As a television and film scholar, I hardly wish to conclude that genres never expand rather than limit trans representations, a topic I address in more detail in the Conclusion. Current trends suggest that trans

characters do not need to be presented as a "cis problem" when they appear in ensemble casts in a variety of dramas: Laverne Cox as a partner in the legal drama *Doubt* (CBS, 2017, S01); Nomi Marks as a member of pod of sensates in the science-fiction conspiracy thriller *Sense8* (Netflix, 2015–2018, S01–02); Alex Blue Davis as a new intern on the medical drama *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2017, S14); Asia Kate Dillon as a GNC market analyst in the finance thriller *Billions* (Showtime, 2017–2018, S02–03); and Nicole Maines as a journalist and superhero on *Supergirl* (The CW, 2018, S04). Such depictions rightfully show that the trans community should be recognized for qualities beyond their atypical gender identity or history, an achievement more common in independent documentaries.[15] Yet I also wish that mainstream storylines could provide cis audiences with more ways to understand the range of trans bodies and identities and parallel their experiences of gender with their own, so they can be more effective allies against transphobic legislative and interpersonal attacks that continue even as the U.S. moves into another decade. Until then, trans persons will continue to be harmed—personally, professionally, and violently—from these myths of an invariant gender binary and naturalized sex/gender correlation that continue to restrict opportunities and authenticity for every person regardless of their gender identity.

Notes

1. The terms "trans" and "transgender" in this book denote persons who experience an incongruence between their sex as assigned at birth and their gender identity, whether they utilize medical options to change physically or not or whether they identify within or outside of the gender binary. Persons who do not experience this incongruence I refer to as "cisgender." While the accompanying terminology "trans woman" and "cis woman" is used to differentiate between the two, it is not meant validate one identity over another or presume one is more or less authentic. I acknowledge both "cisgender" and "transgender" remain contested terms whose meaning continues to evolve. Additional explanation may be found in Appendix A: Glossary for Gender Identities and Characters.
2. For that reason, as I later explain, films like *Tootsie* and series like *Bosom Buddies* do not appear in Appendix A but female "impersonators" like in *Psycho* do. Since I am analyzing mainstream and widely accessible productions, pornography is also excluded but is another genre of media analysis for trans representations. See, for example, Phillips; Escoffier; and Steinbock.