From Dorian's Closet to Elektra's Trunk: visibility, trauma and gender euphoria in *Pose*

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> '"Fuck Hollywood … This makes you uncomfortable? It should. It should make you fucking shake in your motherfucking boots. This is speaking the truth. This is what *Pose* is"' (Janet Mock)

Introduction

In 2018, *Pose* arrived on TV screens in a cacophony of sequins, feathers and drama, and an equal tumult of audience expectation. Created by queer impresario Ryan Murphy with long-term collaborators Steven Canals and Brad Falchuk, the series centred on the lives and loves of a group of queer people of colour involved in the ballroom scene in 1980s New York, depicting the personal relationships and conflicts of rival drag houses alongside actual historical events, encompassing gentrification, the AIDS pandemic and the devastating impact of cultural conservatism on working-class communities, and domestic violence, most notably in the dramatization of the real-life murder of performer Venus Xtravaganza. These social and interpersonal struggles are juxtaposed with spectacular ballroom montages that structure and underline the emotional affordances of the plot. In the pilot episode, Caribbean-American drag mother Elektra has her 'children' break into the Metropolitan Museum of Art and steal a display of opulent, Tudor-themed theatrical costumes. On becoming trapped inside, Elektra, dressed from head to toe in white fur, hurls a trashcan through a plate glass window, allowing the House of Abundance to make their escape: the costumes are debuted in a grand ball, the first of the season, showcasing tableaux of extreme glamour with Elektra as reigning queen of drag surrounded by fawning acolytes who literally kneel at her approach. Walking to the end of the runway, members of the House are cuffed and led away by the

NYPD, unrepentant, giving great face to the last. 'AND THAT' summarises Billy Porter's emcee Pray Tell, 'IS HOW. TO. DO. A. BALL' ('Pilot' 2018).

From the outset, then, *Pose* establishes a concern with the politics of pleasure and with the smashing of figurative as well as literal boundaries through the spectacle of Black and Latinx bodies joyfully smashing through the panes of glass that screen and delimit the access of marginalised subjects to culture. Such an image resonates with current themes in the representation of marginalised bodies. In 2018, Jay-Z and Beyoncé released a similar video showing African American bodies joyfully out of place in the Met Museum. Kirsty Fairclough writes that such images of marginalised subjects '[challenge] the limited portrayals of blackness that audiences are used to seeing in museums and 'invites the audience to take in an entirely new narrative, one that is direct and beautiful in its celebration of an (often intensely capitalist) sense of the many virtues of blackness ... highlighting the importance of a diversity of representation in such traditionally hallowed halls' (Fairclough 2018). For Fairclough, then, the spectacle of Black transgression into the 'hallowed' spaces of culture embodies Black joy. In this article, I build on this analysis to argue that in *Pose*, Black joy is inseparably entangled with the related phenomenon of gender euphoria. Through the pilot episode, the stage is set for two key preoccupations: with images of containment, secrecy and marginality, and with the staging of gender euphoria as an antidote to dysphoric narratives that predominate in cisnormative discourses of transness. In allowing Elektra to act with impunity, facing down the power of the carceral white supremacist cispatriarchal state, this episode establishes a specific model of authenticity. In *Pose*, authenticity is framed not through claims to documentary realism nor through the privileging of grittiness and trauma, but through fantasy. As I argue in this article, this sets the scene for a later episode in which Elektra, who also works as a dominatrix, again evades detection after hiding the body of a white, middle-class client. By analysing the way that Elektra travels from the 'hallowed halls'

of the museum to the sweaty, heaving floor of the ballroom to the shadows of the basement and the closet, we can trace an alternative model for exploring the ways in which marginalisation and creativity are entangled in queer imaginative spaces.

In this essay, I argue that *Pose* constitutes an important step in attempting to reconcile the need to affirm and reclaim lived experiences of trauma, but to do so in a way that does justice to the creative and intellectual labour of trans, nonbinary and gender nonconforming people of colour. By recycling, reframing and rethinking a broad archive of media texts, it poses a challenge both to mainstream notions of visibility and to queer media studies. Mock's 'fuck Hollywood' is not only a rallying cry for a decentring of the white supremacist and cisheteronormative hierarchies that structure media industries, but for a new way of seeing queer lives beyond dominant framings of visibility as progress. By focussing on a single storyline – drag mother, sex worker and fashion icon Elektra Abundance's accidental killing of one of her clients – I argue that *Pose* not only satirises and overturns dominant tropes in portrayals of LGBTQIA+ people's trauma, but also plays with notions of marginality and shame that dominated queer theory in the 1980s in a way that engenders new possibilities for thinking through queer representation.

Beyond Glamour and Trauma: narratives of in/visibility

In recent years, queer identities, lives and stories have been integrated into popular culture to an extent that would have been unimaginable until relatively recently. A key part of this attempt to make sense of queerness in the present is the quest for a shared queer past. A trend in recent film and television has been the revisiting and reclaiming of stories that have been erased from mainstream media and from official historical accounts. This links to what might be seen as a wider 'post-traumatic turn' in popular culture, in which the traumas of the past are revisited

and processed through media in order to understand how they continue to haunt and structure material reality in the present.

Television is at the forefront of this collective processing, providing an alternative to the representational norms and politics of mainstream cinema, and proposing contested and often contradictory ideas about what alternative futures might be imagined through transformational narratives. In particular, Western popular media have focussed on the HIV/AIDS pandemic from the 1980s onwards as a means of affirming a traumatic past, but also of uncovering traditions of queer resistance through activism, art and popular culture. Framed both as an originary moment for queer resistance and as a time of entirely socially normalised homophobia, then, the 80s function as a key site for understanding what meaningful protest might look like and how to pay attention to collective cultural memories of violence that haunt the present, but also as a source of rich visual and sensory inspiration. At the same time, the emergence of current social movements – notably trans-inclusive feminism, questions about the representation of trans women following the widely heralded 'trans tipping point' (Steinmetz 2014) and the resurgent Black Lives Matter movement – have raised key questions about whose past is revisited in these moments of collective nostalgia, and about how the framing of particular events as 'in the past' obscures their continuity in the present.

As a corrective to dominant narratives of queer identity, *Pose* is deeply concerned with the politics of narrative, and with the potential of Gothic farce and melodrama to present a fantastical alternative to cisnormative and racialised narrative tropes. Central to this project is the representation of gender euphoria. In recent years, critical attention has been paid to the way that narratives of dysphoria and trauma become attached to trans and gender nonconforming bodies. In 2013, the DSM-IV marked a shift from 'gender identity disorder' to 'gender dysphoria' in an attempt to address the stigma of trans subjects in psychiatry. At the same time, progressive social movements and media highlighted the disproportionate risk

of violence, mental distress and suicide experienced by trans populations (Austin et al 2021). As a consequence, as I shall argue, liberal representations of trans communities and individuals have tended to over-emphasise narratives of trauma. More recently, trans theorists and activists have proposed 'gender euphoria' as an antidote to this fetishizing of dysphoria and trauma. Described as 'the powerfully positive emotions that can come from one's gender/sex' and which affirm the 'freedom, joy, and love inherent in people's gendered experiences' (Beischel et al 2021: n.pag), *Pose* can be read, then, within this emerging concern with euphoria and the politics of pleasure. Through tropes of crime and impunity, it is aligned with a history of more marginal queer narratives and performances that both acknowledge pain, but also embody an affirmation and centring of pleasure that is missing from mainstream representation.

As I have suggested, gender euphoria is central to this venting and processing of historic and present trauma. This poses a problem for representations of trans, nonbinary and gender nonconforming lives - how to do justice to the violence experienced by queer populations, without repeating familiar images of queer subjects as inherently vulnerable. As Julia Serano (2007) writes, this is particularly important for trans women, who have been excessively linked to trauma. Trans and nonbinary thinkers have written eloquently of the ways in which this overarching association of gender conformity with trauma interlinks with the actual relations of social and biomedical surveillance to which trans bodies are subjected. Serano (2007) tracks the universalising narratives of the 'pathetic trans woman' that dominated mainstream culture, showing how transfeminine subjects are produced as the object of a cisnormative, pitying gaze. As Jacob Tobia further argues, bodily trauma is seen as a necessary condition for trans identity: 'the first thing that's challenging about the classical trans narrative is that it glamorizes trauma… too often, the world demands that we earn our transness through our trauma' (2020: 15). Narratives of spectacular trauma are

played out in cisnormative media narratives as well as through psychiatry and the biomedical gaze. There is an intrinsic link, then, between the representation of trans subjects as inherently tragic, and the actual denigration and oppression of trans subjects. The 'trans subject' has been historically produced as dysphoric through the spectacular cisnormative gaze. As Laura Stamm argues, dominant narratives frame trans existence 'tragedy porn', in which 'cis audiences are able to voyeuristically consume trans women's excessive suffering' and hence to know themselves as caring and ethical (2020: [n.pag.]). Such affectively charged responses to media produce a comforting sense of empathy and at the same time allow audiences to remain ignorant of their own complicity with cisnormative and racist structures.

For Florence Ashley and Carolyn Ells, this focus on trauma as the hallmark of authenticity erases the possibilities for creativity inherent in trans experience. 'Trans embodiment', they write, 'can be irreducibly creative. Creativity is one of the manifold ways in which we may assert ownership over our bodies, transforming them into an art piece that is truly ours out of previously alienating flesh' (Ashley and Ells 2019: 2-3) or, as J Horncastle beautifully puts it, the 'pleasure and optimism' that arise from 'a sense of being able to feel a way into the poetry of my gender" (Horncastle 2018: 262). In *TransNarratives*, Kristi Carter and James Brunton propose a shift of focus: not to deny the existence of trauma, but to invest more deeply in trans people's creativity. They propose gender euphoria, with its more nuanced and celebratory account of trans lives, as an alternative methodological framework that challenges the trauma-centric narratives promulgated through media (2021). 'Euphoria', as they summarise, 'is not the feeling of elation induced by embodiment but rather … a rush of excitement in expressing and chronicling the messiness of a trans life' (Carter and Brunton 2021: 220).

Arriving at a moment of intense critical discussion around representations of trans and gender nonconforming lives, *Pose* inhabits a contradictory set of demands: the need to acknowledge and uncover histories that have been erased, but without diverting attention from the struggles of the present. By centring pleasure, the show speaks to a contemporary concern with the desire to understand and give voice to collective trauma and to understand its impact, and at the same time hold space for pleasure and celebration. While it is impossible for a single production always to resolve all of these contradictions, the show takes seriously this struggle to affirm queer creativity at a time when trans lives – especially those of people of colour – are made intensely precarious by the very forms of visibility that were supposed to bring liberation. As such, it encapsulates a wider struggle over what it means to be represented as opposed to merely (hyper) visible. This struggle over representation politics can be seen in its reclaiming of historic source materials.

Queer Times and Places: gentrification and the gazse

Since at least the 90s, queer theorists have outlined how LGBTQ+ audiences developed highly attuned close analysis skills, intuitively and reflexively decoding ambiguity and subtext in order to see themselves onscreen. Queerness has always engendered active reading practices that refute the notion of pop culture audiences as passive recipients of ideology. In *Tendencies*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wrote of the power queer readers have 'to make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit; to smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled' (1993: 3). Writer and cultural commentator Manuel Betancourt – who also writes a popular blog on *Pose* for *Vulture* – writes compellingly of the 'suggestive, in-between gray area of "queer reading"', a distinctly gay art form … that, while treated as a relic of a time gone by, remains a creative tool for queer young people today' (2017). While the recent rise in openly queer characters is 'a leap

forward for gay rights', he argues, there is a certain radical potential in the ability to read against the grain: the 'investment and celebration of subtext', he concludes, 'need not be antithetical to a progressive agenda of LGBT representation. Its continued embrace by queer audiences is a testament to the power of queer readers nurturing a still-radical way of refusing media as is' (2017).

With this in mind, we might consider how *Pose* has been shaped by audiences' changing expectations. When the series was first announced, many were sceptical. Ryan Murphy is a divisive figure whose earlier output, especially *Glee* (2009-2015), has been critiqued for its privileging of cis, white gay men and reductive images of female, minority ethnic and disabled characters. As such, he is associated with a 'tolerance model' of inclusivity which is seen as inadequate in the light of increasing social inequality (McNicholas Smith 2020: 121; Walters 2014). Kate McNicholas Smith equates this work with a wider failure of neoliberal and homonormative representations that 'mobilise… characters that are queer in their identifications and romances, but distinctly "normal" in everything else' (2020: 165). Such homonormative images have been framed as a form of representational gentrification which achieves mainstream respectability for cis, white gay men at the expense of trans and nonbinary people, queers of colour and sex workers. While more recent media coverage has focussed on a shift to inclusion of these neglected subjects, as Jack Halberstam argues, the very idea of a 'trans tipping point' erases decades of radicalism, suggesting that equality 'just arrives' as the inevitable culmination of liberal progressive history. Further, this idea of inevitable progress is intimately bound up with the literal destruction and commercialisation of queer neighbourhoods as well as with the assimilation of narratives, languages and cultural practices. The radicalism of trans activism is lost in this weakened model of progress, erasing the truth that trans activism was not

traditionally aimed at securing government recognition, but 'at the dismantling of the gender system as we know it' (2018: [n.pag.]).

These concerns were addressed, if not entirely laid to rest, by the unprecedented inclusion of trans and nonbinary talent at all levels of the production. According to press reports Murphy, concerned about critiques of the representational politics in his earlier shows, invited Janet Mock and later Our Lady J to contribute writing and directing skills; Mock, a hugely influential African-American writer, journalist and media figure, is a graduate of Half, his initiative for including black and female directors (Galanes 2018). Additionally, women and nonbinary femmes of colour were cast as the show's leads, forming the core of what was hailed as the largest transgender cast in television history. This representation continues off-camera; media reports claim that more than half the cast and crew – 140 workers in all – are trans/nonbinary (Galanes 2018). The leads' affecting, nuanced performances give the lie to the transparently discriminatory yet oft-repeated claim that directors cannot cast queer people of colour (POC) actors in queer roles because the talent simply does not exist – a claim which, along with the paradoxical confinement of actual queer talent to the closet, structured LGBTQ representation in Western cinema for much of its history. The notion of seeing and being seen, and of a dire need for representations of trans people of colour beyond the transphobic narratives promoted by the mainstream media ensured that the show arrived freighted with a burden of expectation even greater than that which typically greets new queer-focused media launches. As Our Lady J describes, this lays the ground to overturn the dehumanisation of trans people, since 'that's the beginning to the end of violence against our community'. Or, as Murphy summarises, 'the most powerful thing a young person can see is themselves reflected in the culture' (Damshenas 2019). What is interesting about *Pose*, though, is that it fuses the Gothic and melodramatic elements that typify Murphy, Canals and Falchuk's work, but reframes them

through the lens of very contemporary concerns about the relationship between media visibility and actual social justice. Themes of space, representation, gentrification and labour are as much a part of *Pose*'s remit as the glamour, ritual and aesthetic drama of the queer ballroom culture of 1980s New York.

These concerns play out in Season 2, most obviously through a plot concerning the literal gentrification of the queer spaces of Greenwich Village and the Piers, where Blanca, Angel and other characters all operate as sex workers at various points in the narrative – a site which has been described as 'the queer capital of the twentieth century, and not just as site of the Stonewall riots in the latter half-century but as the setting of heightened phantasmagoria' (Chisholm 2004). *Pose* covers the erosion of this space through the incursions of extreme capitalism, as well as focussing directly on protests against the property developer and slumlord Frederica Norman, played by Patti LuPone and loosely based on Leona Helmsley, who rents a nail salon to Blanca and then burns her out on learning that she is trans.

It is not only literal gentrification that concerns queer theorists, though, but the ways in which the displacement of actual queer communities is entangled with gentrifying and homonormative trends in representation. Queer scholars have made productive links between homonormative media images and the annexation of geographic spaces by capitalism (Halberstam 2016). Cinematic gentrification, Carl Keegan argues, proceeds alongside the colonisation of actual historically queer spaces in New York, Seattle, San Francisco (and, we might add, symbolic queer spaces like Pride) by privileged middle-class subjects. Keegan explores cinematic gentrification by interrogating Roland Emmerich's critically panned *Stonewall* (2015) as the starting point from which to map a new wave of mainstream cinema that panders to perceived demand from mainstream audiences for unchallenging images of queerness that centre the experiences of white, cisgender, middle-class men and which explicitly erase trans women of colour like Marsha P Johnson. The rhetorics used to justify

these sanitised media products, he suggests, are identical to that of property developers who believe they are engaged in 'disruptive innovation' to the benefit of marginalised communities, with identical effects: the literal and symbolic displacement of queer subjects, especially working-class and trans people of colour. These are 'films sold as windows into the LGBTQ past' which function only as 'mirrors reflecting the gentrified minds of their own producers, gay and straight alike' (2016: 51). Further, as Laura Stamm demonstrates, the gentrified images produced by mainstream cinema have historically served to squeeze out alternative, more radical queer visions. This struggle is encapsulated in the dualistic representations that arose from the HIV/AIDS pandemic. These were polarised between the New Queer Cinema of politically engaged filmmakers like Derek Jarman, Barbara Hammer, Todd Haynes and John Greyson – important work which emerged from authentically queer spaces but neither sought nor reached a mainstream audience – and sparse and limited mainstream representations bookended by Jonathan Demme's *Philadelphia* (1993) all the way up to Jean-Marc Vallee's *Dallas Buyer's Club* (2014). The latter – with its focus on an Oskar Schindler-like cishet white male 'ally' and its constant misgendering of the one (white) transfeminine character, who is played by a cis male actor, typifies the ways in which mainstream structures of distribution and capital result in 'representations of queerness that do not challenge dominant culture's understandings of gender and sexuality' (Stamm 2020). Ballroom has been subject to commodification and appropriation, and to the consequent exploitation of people of colour's artistic labour since at least the late 80s, most notably in 1990 when Madonna took the House of Xtravanganza as her 'inspiration' for *Vogue*. This relentless fracking of queer spaces for cultural relevance has been the subject of academic critique from the outset, especially by Black feminists (whose work has of course been similarly 'inspirational' for white scholars). But it is by returning to *Pose*' source material that we can see these power dynamics play out most starkly.

The ballroom culture of the late 20th century is not, of course, unfamiliar territory for contemporary TV audiences: in this sense, the show demands to be read in the context of recent developments in queer representation. Most notably, it shares a genealogy with perhaps the defining queer TV spectacle of our time, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, a show that often underwrites its authenticity by referencing aspects of Jennie Livingstone's 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning*. This claim to authenticity is underwritten by host RuPaul and fellow judge Michelle Visage's actual involvement in the ballroom scene (Collie and Commane 2020; Hamad 2018). *Drag Race* has capitalised on these connections to expose a version of ballroom culture to mainstream visibility, forging 'an exponential growth in audiences … and a trajectory towards a wider public consciousness' meaning that the camp pleasures the show offers have become open to, and made open to, a far wider constituency than what could be termed the 'LGBTQ+ community' (Mercer and Sarson 2020: 480).

Like *RPDR*, *Pose* occupies this fusing of queer archival project with very contemporary themes of fandom, celebrity and digital culture. Despite its focus on the past, it is very much embedded in contemporary mediated cultures: a meme factory which embodies 'the charisma of the social media age; a form of algorithmic charisma', generating 'compressed, shareable, reproducible, GIFable content' (Mercer and Sarson 2020: 490). But unlike *Drag Race*, which translates the messiness and creativity of ballroom into the predictable logics of competition and capitalist labour characteristic of reality TV, *Pose* has been hailed for subverting the narratives of cultural appropriation, voyeuristic spectacle and tourism which are at stake in Livingstone's film, and which continue to dominate mainstream images of queerness.

On first viewing *Paris is Burning* at a documentary film festival in the 1990s, bell hooks was struck by the way this avowedly 'politically neutral … candid, even celebratory look at Black drag balls' evacuated blackness of context and meaning (1992: 150). Hooks'

groundbreaking essay interrogates how Livingstone's film persuades (White) audiences that they are watching an ethnographic piece documenting the lives of Black queer 'natives', that what they are seeing is 'knowledge', transparent and innocent of context, an assumption that was reflected back by contemporary reviews of the film which praised its insight into a mysterious, hidden world. As such, she argues, Livingstone takes up the White colonial gaze (a point hooks underlines by quoting Livingstone's own graceless assertions of colour- and gender-blindness), assuming an 'imperial overseeing position' that leaves questions about the way that Whiteness represents Blackness, and about the responsibility of queer filmmakers to challenge this, unasked (1992: 151). And indeed the film gives disproportionate space to Black performers' aspirational longing to attain White supremacist beauty standards, such as Venus Xtravaganza's assertion that "I would like to be a spoiled, rich White girl … get what they want, whenever they want it' (Livingstone 1990). But Livingstone's manipulation of her informants is not limited to abstract questions of representation. House mother Pepper LaBeija, who appeared in the film, has spoken out about feelings of betrayal over the exploitation of performers' labour: 'we wanted the attention … we loved being filmed. Later, when she did the interviews, she gave us a couple hundred dollars. But she told us that when the film came out, we would be all right. There would be more coming'. In the end, the film made $4 million, of which an estimated $55 thousand went to its thirteen stars (Collins 2019). It could be argued that prestige documentary is inherently gentrifying: by taking ballroom out of the sweaty, emotionally charged space of the club into the hushed atmosphere of the film festival, *Paris is Burning* necessarily engages in an act of appropriation. hooks uncovers the ways in which Livingstone's camera hollows out the Black ritual of the ball, taking Black ritual, 'that ceremonial act that carries with it meaning and significance beyond what appears' (1992: 50) and stripping it of its power. In exposing ballroom culture to a middle-class White audience, it is repackaged as a mere spectacle whose implicit purpose is to reassure White

audiences of the ultimate desirability and naturalness of White supremacist capitalism. In the next section, I will explore how *Pose* revisits a real-life episode, and how this illustrates possibilities for queer community beyond the gaze of the objectifying lens of Livingstone's camera.

Screening the Unseen: From Dorian's Closet to Elektra's Trunk

On May 2, 1994, *New York Magazine* featured a sensational exclusive by Jeanie Russel Kasindorf. Dorian Corey, the iconic New York drag queen, designer, businesswoman, celebrity, mother of House Xtravaganza, and former snake dancer who performed at Wigstock and who appeared in *Paris Is Burning* in the role of worldly-wise queer elder, had recently died of AIDS-related illness at the age of just 56. But it was not the untimely death of this ballroom legend that commanded headlines in the universally homophobic media landscape of the 90s. Instead, the article trumpeted a grim discovery: among her effects was a suitcase containing the mummified corpse of a man (later discovered to be Bobby Worley, a convicted rapist and petty criminal who disappeared in 1968), wrapped in trash bags and pleather – not just pleather, in fact, but Naugahyde, a fabric whose very name reeks of the kind of Halston-era camp Ryan Murphy is obsessed with - and stashed in a closet. He appeared to have been shot in the head, and according to investigators, had been in the closet for between seven months and twenty years. It was, Kasindoff wrote, a gift to tabloid headline writers: 'no tricks or treats, just a mummy in a suitcase' (1994: 52). Like Elektra, Dorian appears as a maternal figure who embodies glamour and authority, dispensing insight from her chaise longue, wrapped in marabou feathers. According to fanlore, this suitcase or trunk is just glimpsed in the foreground during one of Dorian's scenes in the film: a powerful metaphor for the things Livingstone's camera does not see (Livingstone 1990).

The strange find has attracted much speculation. Some commentators suggest that Worley's shame about his own sexuality might have been a factor. It says something about the way camp gets reappropriated as a way of denying and minimising trans women's pain that most wonder if the shooting was therefore a 'crime of passion', even though one of the very few things we know about this man is that he was a *violent rapist*. It is more likely, writes Julianne Tveten, that the death remained hidden because of wider social structures, 'the othering and invisibility of two poor, sexually complex Black people navigating internal and external turmoil in 1960s and '70s America' (2016). By changing the identity of the body in the closet to a wealthy white man, *Pose* draws out these themes of marginality to explore how queer communities operate as a source of solidarity away from the gaze of White heteronormative society.

In a sense, the story of Dorian Corey is ripe for adaptation by Murphy, no doubt selected for its resonance with the 'explorations of camp and the shock of the that characterise his work (McNicholas Smith 2020: 121). As Kate McNicholas Smith notes, Murphy's work has commanded a strong LGBTQIA+ fandom, not only for its overtly queer storylines but for its sense of spectacle drawing on a broad lexicon of camp pop cultural references to mobilise a distinctly 'queer aesthetic' (2020: 121). Encompassing *Nip/Tuck*, *American Horror Story*, *Ratched*, and *Feud*, this body of work mobilises tropes drawn from high camp, melodrama and horror and on key moments in queer history and popular culture to produce a distinctive aesthetic of histrionic glamour. A preoccupation with the closet and with marginality is central to Murphy's sensibility: shows like *Glee* foreground outsider narratives in a way that foregrounds liberal values of tolerance and inclusion, typically by documenting a closeted character's transition to acceptance via joyful, celebratory queer performance.

The juxtaposition of queer subjects with a body hidden in a trunk also, incidentally, invites comparison with key images in twentieth century queer theory: not only of the closet itself, but of the body in a trunk, which recalls Hitchcock's' *Rope*. In the latter, seen as an ur-text of homophobic anxiety in mainstream cinema, the two (white, cis, privileged) gay-coded protagonists finally abandon talk of the perfect murder, hosting a dinner party in which a chest containing their victim's body is used as a buffet table. Briefly, the two discuss the Nietzschean figure of the *Übermensch'* and De Quincey's notion of murder as an art form, ideas they learned from a charismatic master at public school – a popular site of anxieties about homosexuality in the British psyche. Their bubble of arrogance is punctured when they tell their idol Rupert what they have done, and, horrified at the monster he has created, he summons the police by firing a gun – a safe action in the white, middle-class neighbourhood where the film is set (Hitchcock 1948). While Rope shares little in common with a contemporary scripted TV text like *Pose*, the latter text is haunted by its macabre staging of anxieties about queerness and by its representation of monstrous, murderous queer subjects. For DA Miller, the body in the trunk, together with the ambitious single-take staging of the narrative and Hitchcock's trademark unease, speaks to wider anxieties that centre on gay sex. As he writes, in mainstream cinema, 'every discourse that speaks, every representation that shows homosexuality by connotative means alone will thus be implicitly haunted by the phantasm of the thing itself, not just in the form of the name but also, more basically, as what the name conjures up: the spectacle of gay sex (Miller 2013: 123). Academic and filmmaker Meagan Malone makes the connection between Miller's work on *Rope* and her own analysis of trans women's filmmaking. It is productive, she argues, to return to the technical and narrative strategies employed by *Rope* despite the 'sea of media and legislative visibility' (2017: 142) characteristic of our time. In particular, she focusses on the film's use of an apparent one-take narrative ' as a homophobic "symptom" of anti-gay laws and attitudes',

which prevent the explicit acknowledgement of homosexuality in the film. Miller, she writes, shows that the 'rope trick' is evidence of 'both the desire for and fear of seeing homosexuality explicitly rendered' (Malone 2000: 65). Despite the ubiquity of trans characters in film, television, music and art, Malone writes, the prevailing attitudes of Hitchcock's 1940's America have not disappeared, and in some ways have intensified. Recent years have seen an increased media visibility for trans people which has generated 'new targets of derision and hatred in the trans community' (2000: 66).

The figure of the body in the trunk, then, resonates deeply with notions of shame and passing that have dominated mainstream images of queerness. Observers of queer popular culture might be forgiven, then, for greeting a Ryan Murphy adaptation of Corey's story with a certain scepticism. In a sense, the story of Dorian Corey lends itself all too perfectly to the stereotypical 'Murphy touch': combining glamour and decay, ostrich feathers and mummified flesh and the world-weary wisdom of ageing drag queens, as much the stuff of carnival as of actual reality. In fact what follows is, as Engels and Lyle note, 'the quietest episode … that centres findings from the queer archives' (2021: 186): one which stands in tonal contrast to other episodes centred on performance and activism, and which proposes a different set of approach and strategies for centring of trans women of colour's experience.

Episode 2, Season 3, Butterfly/Cocoon, based on the Dorian Corey's life story, exemplifies the complex ways in which the show navigates themes of violence, trauma and resistance. Written by Our Lady J and directed by Janet Mock, who previously made history as the first trans woman of colour to write any television episode (Season 1's *Love is the Message),* this episode marks a further cross-genre shift into true crime. But – as TV critic Manuel Betancourt puts it, 'this wasn't gonna become no cop drama', since '*Pose* was never going to let its characters be framed by a genre so beholden to glorifying the systems that be' (2021). Instead, Mock's meticulous reframing of a real-life incident draws attention to, and

ultimately resists, the policing of Black trans lives. Entitled Butterfly/Cocoon, the episode juxtaposes the blossoming of Angel's modelling career – the butterfly – with the more macabre story of the 'cocoon'.

The storyline in question focuses on Elektra, mother of House Abundance and later of House Evangelista and, at the time of the first episode, the reigning queen of the ballrooms. Like a 20th century Moll Flanders, Elektra rises from obscurity to fabulous wealth over the course of the show, bankrolled by rich lovers and eventually (and without negative consequences) by the Italian mafia, her rise driven by her extravagant beauty, her indomitable personality, and an unshakeable belief in her own worth. She is at once harsh and nurturing, exemplifying the figure of the drag mother for other main characters, including Blanca whom she adopts after the latter has been literally laughed offstage while walking in the 'femme queen' category. In Season 1, Elektra is in many ways the least politically engaged of the main characters: for example, she is reluctant to show up for the Act-Up protest depicted in other episodes. Instead she uses ambition and considerable beauty to benefit from the limited opportunities granted to trans women who 'pass' according to the beauty standards of her time and place. She is both a highly visible and shady figure, situated at the hub of fashionable New York society, as well as its underbelly. As a hostess at cult Vietnamese restaurant and legendary celebrity hangout Indochine, her above-ground persona has access to a space where 'everyone came — everyone: Madonna, Warhol, Basquiat, Schnabel, Mick and Bowie, all the supermodels' (Nadelson 2019). At the same time, she is able to move in the subterranean world beneath the city, where she works as a dominatrix. Elektra, then, travels with poise between dualistic spaces of grime and glamour familiar from nostalgic twenty-first century imaginings of twentieth century New York, albeit as a service worker. It is while working as a domme at the Hellfire Club that Elektra encounters obnoxious client Paul. A wealthy white man who has been banned from strip clubs after a number of assaults

on sex workers, he exemplifies the straight-passing johns who exploit and demean trans sex workers, while also relying on them for the fulfilment of sexual needs deemed unacceptable in heteronormative society. A favourite of Elektra's for his wealth and relative easiness as a client – he pays her mainly for restraint and verbal abuse with elements of sissification – Paul pushes the boundaries of their agreement by insisting on using drugs during their session, paying extra for the privilege. On leaving him unattended at his insistence, she is horrified to find him dead from choking on his own vomit.

What follows both subverts the expected trajectory of true crime television, and of queer representation. It is a pop culture truism that true friends are those who would hide a body for you: accordingly, Elektra realises that her chosen family are willing to break laws that have never served them in order to preserve her continued existence. Importantly, the episode corrects the assumption in Season 1, Episode 1 that a group of Black and Latinx queers would be able to steal, and to be arrested, without consequence: it is clear from the outset that Elektra must avoid involving the police, although Blanca urges her to do so. Turning next to Candy and then to the wider community, she learns that Ms Orlando, the shady purveyor of illegal silicone injections featured in Season 1, is rumoured to have disappeared a client who died as a result of her dubious services. She hears of this from the ironically named Euphoria, a trans woman (played by nonbinary queen Peppermint of later *Drag Race* fame), who tells them of a miscarriage of justice in which she was accused of theft by a white client who assaulted her, and sent to Riker's Island. Euphoria recounts her experiences in Riker's, encompassing sexual and physical violence from inmates and warders alike, in flashback. It is a powerful scene which, for contemporary audiences, resonates with ongoing 'debates' over trans women's internment in men's prisons, illustrating that these issues are not safely located in the past but continue in the present. Euphoria impresses on Elektra that no matter what happens, she cannot expect to survive incarceration. 'For girls

like us', she concludes, 'the system is never on our side'; or, as Candy put it, 'he white? Oh bitch, you fucked' (Butterfly/Cocoon 2020). With the help of Orlando and to the strains of Evelyn Champagne King's disco anthem *Shame*, the group cover Paul's leaking body in lye, cocoon him in pleather and, seal him in a trunk which is finally laid to rest in Elektra's opulent closet. The scene is lengthy and grisly: in contrast to the necropolitics enacted by the authorities, which reduce the deaths of people with HIV to mere statistics, the episode does not spare the viewer or its characters in spelling out what is involved in transforming human life into baggage. Elektra is subsequently haunted by remorse, believing she can smell decay, and waking from troubled dreams to lie awake brooding on the body's presence. 'I know he was a pig of a man, but I pray over him. He's mine now', she tells Blanca, 'he'll be with me for the rest of my life' (Butterfly/Cocoon 2020). This sombre moment is all the more so because it happens as Angel is being chosen by Ford Models as 'the fresh face of 1990' by Wet n' Wild cosmetics. While the younger woman finally achieves visibility as a model, then, Elektra – and the audience – remain haunted by the lingering effects of a system that cannot recognise trans women of colour as human.

From her moment of empathy and remorse over Paul's cocooned body, Elektra flourishes as a character, becoming more vulnerable and openly loving without abandoning the fierceness and glamour that, it turns out, is not just an individual strategy for surviving white supremacist patriarchy, but a gift that is needed by her community. This surrender to the forces of the heteropatriarchy is rejected by *Pose*, whose central characters are both more resourceful, and have far less reason to believe in the possibility of justice at the hands of the White supremacist state. Resisting the shift into 'copaganda' through which the intersecting genres of true crime and crime drama typically soothe the anxieties of their law-abiding audiences – anxieties which these genres are of course largely responsible for creating – *Pose* instead leaves open a fertile space of queer ambivalence. In this context, we could think

about Dorian's - and by extension Elektra's - trunk as embodying everything that is *not* visible to the intrusive anthropological eye of Livingstone's camera. Dorian has wise things to say about visibility, and about the need to be seen: but she says these while the dead body she concealed is in shot. In contrast, Elektra's trunk subverts narratives of the closet in a way that mirrors and shadows the joyful window-smashing of *Pose's* opening scene. The closet here becomes a boundaried space and a site of agency. By allowing its subjects to act with impunity, this episode reframes the closet as containing secret: but rather than a secret that will inevitably surface so that the social transgression it represents can be contained and neutralised, it embodies the entanglement of trauma with possibilities for survival and hope beyond the limitations imposed by the objectifying, capitalistic desires that Paul embodies.

Conclusion

As José Munoz once wrote, 'queerness is not yet here … The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there' (2009: 185). I have offered an affirmative reading of *Pose*, suggesting that in returning to the contested then and there of queer history, it proposes a way of doing queer visibility differently. In this sense - for all its glamour and melodrama – it can be read as reclaiming both ballroom and contemporary popular culture as a site of precisely the kind of Black queer ritual hooks argues is erased by the gaze of White supremacist ciscentric cinema. In analysing the way that Butterfly/Cocoon stages that which is hidden from Livingstone's camera, I have argued that this storyline proposes a rich rethinking of the relations of visibility and erasure through which mainstream media images have served only to further objectify the subjects they claim to represent (Tuchman 1978). As I have argued, questions of 'realness' and authenticity' are central to contemporary queer media, and to debates about representation more generally. *Pose* proposes a different kind of realness: a

truth which opposes the symbolic annihilation (Tuchman 1978) of trans femmes of colour enacted by mainstream cinema and restoring the pleasure and power of ballroom as ritual. What is inside Elektra's trunk is not the expected trajectory of glamour and trauma, but a moving meditation on the ways in which these themes are entangled, and on themes of family, belonging and intimacy that transcend them. In affirming the gender euphoria, as well as the pain and indeed the everyday struggles of trans women of colour, as Engels and Lyle argue, *Pose*'s excavation of the denigrated queer past emerges as 'a building block for a fierce queer future' (2021: 172).

In this article, I have argued that *Pose* poses key questions for contemporary media studies: how to represent queer histories, including traumatic histories, while refusing the logics of trauma porn and consumption of queer pain? How to celebrate the richness and beauty of queer cultural production while also paying attention to the overbearing social constraints that limit queer people's expression – especially queer people of colour? And, how to do all this in a world where queerness is increasingly mainstreamed? By asking these questions, *Pose* challenges queer theory, and queer studies, to find a way through and beyond tropes of shame, marginality and transgression that operate only to further marginalise and denigrate trans women of colour. 'As a Black trans woman who spent her youth searching for reflection, finally, with *Pose*, I saw myself vaunted and dignified on a familiar screen', writes Mock: and we wonder why it has taken so long for these stories to be brought to a mainstream audience. While a single media production cannot correct the intense representation and social marginalisation affecting queer people of colour, I have argued that centring pleasure, melodrama and euphoria engenders powerful but precarious opportunities not only to become visible on the terms of mainstream homonormative media, but to challenge the very notion of visibility itself. In responding to trauma with transformative moments of gender euphoria, *Pose* thus crystallises urgent struggles over representation and

offers a creative solution to the critical impasse between representations of queer trauma and queer pleasure.

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