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**SETTING THE TERMS OF OUR OWN VISIBILITY A Conversation  
between Sam Feder and Alexandra Juhasz on Trans Activist  
Media in the United States**

Alexandra Juhasz  
*CUNY Brooklyn College*

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# 3

## SETTING THE TERMS OF OUR OWN VISIBILITY

### *A Conversation between Sam Feder and Alexandra Juhasz on Trans Activist Media in the United States*

Sam Feder

Alexandra Juhasz

ALEX JUHASZ: IN THE SUMMER OF 2016, I sat down at my computer and Skyped with my friend and fellow queer media activist Sam Feder about their film, *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen*. What follows is a highly edited transcript of our conversation, paying particular attention to Sam’s core research findings about trans representational history and how their findings might align with their processes and goals as a trans activist media maker committed to telling this complex story. Sam understood their documentary as something akin to the “trans *Celluloid Closet*,” meaning basically a made-for-the-mainstream, rather conventional talking-heads history documentary that would break important ground by introducing trans history in the United States, and also representational autonomy, to a largely unknowing and perhaps even uncertain audience and industry, who are little informed about trans history in the United States and the role that activism, struggles for human and political rights, and linked projects of representation have played therein. This would be a different activist project from the movement-based, movement-specific films Sam had made previously. Choosing to make a more “mainstream” project—based on their ever-growing awareness of the dangers

and historical abuses of mainstream representation—was raising both new possibilities and challenges for Sam: “My career can only go so far before I need a larger audience, to access funding, distribution, and to pay my rent. We are in a moment of possibility, where more people from all walks of life want to learn about and see stories about trans people’s lives.”

Our conversation revolves around a set of key concerns for activist media makers, while staying focused on the specificity of trans activist and media history, the realities of trans people’s lives and social justice needs, and Sam’s unique trajectory and commitments as a queer feminist trans media maker. As we talk, we circle frequently, and from different angles, around questions related to trans visibility: as a political and representational goal, how increased visibility often relies on a logic of tokenism or on an over- or misaligned emphasis on traumatic events; how some trans people are easier to see than others, given their alignments with race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, profession, immigration status, and the like; how there are different implications for and competing regimes of visibility for trans people in their diversity as raced, classed, gendered people; and how “visibility can leave some people more vulnerable to harm, particularly when we consider the intersections of race, class, citizenship, profession, immigration status, religion, ability, nationality, age, gender, and the like.” In fact, we argue that coming late, as it does, some instances of the trans tipping point benefit from decades of intersectional analysis and organizing within feminist, queer, antiracist movements. We think carefully about what is gained and lost by an increased visibility that has been almost entirely circumscribed by a “victimhood and empathy model,” while acknowledging that reaching audiences of cisgender people (as well as trans people) must honor that all individuals’ “histories of knowing and seeing are staggered.” We consider whether identification from a cisgender witness is an important activist goal, or if perhaps implicating all humans in a larger social fabric might be more productive. Then, looking at my own work within the AIDS activist video movement, we consider how other movements, like that of trans rights, can work to focus discourse about ourselves and movements, and posit that for feminist queer activists this control is not simply over meaning making, but also about how that meaning is made—that is, producing fair, equitable spaces for engaged media making that honor our own communities: “It comes down to the dissemination of power, working in a collaborative, accountable space, hiring people invested in the topic, job training, mentorship, making space to see how people are feeling—a holistic sense of care and responsibility for each other within the production.

Being transparent about how things come to fruition, funding, and budget, how decisions are made.”

Several years have passed since we first spoke, and Sam shot an impressive slate of interviewees and received sizable if still partial funding. For this publication, we have decided to leave the transcript largely as it was, a record of where Sam was in their preproduction and also where we were as a larger image culture in relation to the “trans tipping point.” In a relatively short time since our initial interview, it is pretty remarkable to see how much more media has been made but also what has stayed stubbornly the same: many of the structuring tropes and their attached structures of knowing and feeling, the media attention to only some, camera-friendly, segments of the trans community, and the larger issues of control over images and image production.. We conclude this effort with a short coda that Sam has written where they bring us up to date on their film, allowing us to see what happens when the ideas we discuss are actually put into play within the forces of money, people, industries, and genres that support (and hinder) trans and all activist media.

### The Trans Tipping Point

Alex: Hi, Sam. Can you tell me about your background as an artist and your current work on *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen*, your documentary about the history of trans people in film and TV?

Sam: Hi, Alex. Since the early 2000s, my work has focused on current activist issues that I’m part of and witnessing, specifically regarding transgender lives. My present film is in response to the growing visibility of trans people in the media and puts that visibility into historical context. How did we arrive at this moment? How have trans images evolved? How does increased visibility intersect with how trans people understand ourselves or how society understands trans lives? Does visibility equal progress?

Alex: How is this moment of visibility different from earlier examples of trans visibility?

Sam: This moment is different because there are a *few* more opportunities, there is a *slight* shift in how a *few* dominant films and TV shows write trans characters, and transness has become commodified in the industry. The problem with casting trans visibility as something new is it breaks it from a historical narrative, rendering the past invisible.

Back to your question: there are unique differences that are apparent with earlier examples of trans visibility—and distinct overlap. In 2012, Joe Biden said that transgender discrimination is the civil rights issue of our time. In June 2014, Laverne Cox was on the cover of *Time* magazine. The title read “Transgender Tipping Point: America’s next civil rights frontier.” In opposition to the prevalence of historically flat and stereotypical portrayals of trans people, there is an increase and change in how trans lives are being portrayed. Some respectable trans characters have been written for TV (*The Bold and the Beautiful*, *Transparent*, *Orange Is the New Black*), with some trans people cast as trans characters (Laverne Cox, Trace Lysette, Alexandra Billings, Ian Harvie, Scott Turner Schofield). With mainstream media declaring a shift in visibility as a “tipping point,” I hear people noting this as a general success for trans people’s lives. Except for the uplift of a few actors, I don’t see success reflected in our lived reality. Visibility can leave people more vulnerable to harm. For some, not being seen as trans (a.k.a. stealth) keeps them safer, particularly when we consider the intersections of race, class, citizenship, profession, immigration status, religion, ability, nationality, age, gender, and the like. Trans people are overwhelmingly underemployed. For some, being stealth is a survival tool. Calling this particular visibility a “success” performs two erasures: of the ongoing (or increased) struggles in trans people’s lives and of the previous visibility of trans people in media. That’s why I became interested in making a film on the history of trans people in media.

Alex: What have you learned?

Sam: There is a *long* history! And film and TV in the United States have different trajectories. The first time (that I’ve found so far) in American television history where an out trans woman played a trans character was in 2000: Jessica Crockett played Louise in *Dark Angel* (2000). Prior to that, in 1994, Jazzmun Clayton (who later identified as trans) had a recurring role in the John Larroquette show. In 2005, Alexandra Billings played an out trans woman on the TV show version of *Romy & Michelle*. In 2007, Candis Cayne was the first trans woman to have a recurring role as a trans woman on *Dirty Sexy Money*. In 1977, Norman Lear produced the TV show *All That Glitters* including a recurring trans character, played by a cis woman. I hope to find even earlier examples in the archives. Even with this current [as of 2016] increase in trans casting, the default continues to be casting cis people in trans roles.

Back to today’s opportunities for trans actors: What does success for a few mean in this equation? What does it mean for trans people who are not

invested in Hollywood but can't escape the cultural conversation? What was the role of trans movements in leading up to this "tipping point"? Are social movements and services concerning trans lives benefiting from this "tipping point" at all? This "tipping point" made room for Caitlyn Jenner to come out and have a reality TV show, *I Am Cait*. Did trans people benefit from watching that show? *Transparent* is hiring trans actors and a few on crew. Do the opportunities for those few individuals size up to the opportunities the cis people involved are embracing due to the Emmy, Golden Globes, and Peabody awards they've received? Who benefits from this "tipping point"? Are there different tipping points for trans people of color, or for trans men and trans women?

Alex: It is certainly the understanding in contemporary popular culture that there is more visibility or a new visibility, that there are more images to see, and that trans voices are more available within dominant discourse than before. But what the mainstream culture understands is one thing; from where you stand, is there a tipping point?

Sam: Tipping where and toward what? I suppose you have to agree on a set of beliefs to even talk about the tipping point. But that's for another conversation. Back to this "tipping point," which alludes to more visibility: then my question is, visibility of and for whom? A shift in public discourse by and about whom? Does the visibility that people seek only serve as a profitable commodity for others? To be visible, we must conform to the demands placed on us by a public that wants to buy a story that affirms their sense of themselves as ethical. Trans people are not yet authorized to set the terms of our own visibility.

Alex: I'd add that trans visibility, especially when told as it almost always is as a story of transformation to gender wholeness, works to affirm a cis audience's sense of their own gender clarity.

Sam: Yes, and there are other functions realized by increased trans inclusion. Some are discovering trans people for the first time, finding our lives interesting as metaphors or plot development. Others use distasteful trans tropes we've witnessed for over a century whereby trans characters stand in for trauma, pathology, deception, and pathetic-ness, from the psychotic serial killer to despondent sex worker who ends up dead and discarded. Current stories continue to punish people for being trans. Laverne Cox on *Orange Is the New Black* is behind bars. What does that tell us about the life chances of trans

women? Lili Elbe dies at the end of *The Danish Girl* due to transition-related medical complications. How does casting cis people as trans perpetuate violence against trans people? The idea of transness being something that someone (a cis actor) can put on as a costume (to play a trans role) becomes part of a belief system for people who don't know trans people in real life. According to a study done by GLAAD, 84 percent of Americans say that the only trans people they know are those they've seen in film and TV. Eighty-four percent!

Alex: This is where a film like yours can have incredible political valence: introducing a mainstream audience to this history and a range of trans people and experiences. At this moment of the so-called tipping point, there has also been a related (or unrelated?) set of rather visible social justice activities and struggles around the use of restrooms that had a tipping point of its own. Do you think the visibility in dominant media of trans people and these hyper visible political issues are related?

Sam: Saying that trans visibility *caused* the backlash implies that the backlash wasn't already there. Our visibility created a new target, a face, and a singular issue for people to rally around. Since marriage equality and trans military inclusion became law, there has been an upswing in backlash against LGBT rights. The media gave a ton of airtime to the legislation in North Carolina. Before that, legislatures in twenty-two states proposed bills threatening equal rights, with transgender people receiving the brunt of it. Visibility has created the space for the media to see this issue as newsworthy.

### Trans Tropes as Ideology

Alex: Sounds like in your research you have named a set of recognizable types or stereotypes of trans people.

Sam: Yes, there are a lot of horrible stereotypes. And I'll share them. But then what? Is it better to make three or four flattering portrayals? I'm more curious about how an audience learns to trust what they see. How do filmmakers learn to mimic each other without question? What is the responsibility of the media maker in perpetuating or challenging harmful images?

Putting those questions aside for now, here are common tropes, in no particular order:

- Julia Serrano writes about two central media depictions: the “deceptive” trans person and the “pathetic” trans person. The deceptive trans

person is a character whose trans identity is unknown to the viewer and/or to the other characters. Early cinema uses this act of deception to create forbidden spaces and/or sexual predators. For example, Fatty Arbuckle in the film *Coney Island* [Roscoe Arbuckle, 1917] puts on a woman's bathing suit, gets thrown out of the men's room, enters the women's room, and relaxes. He ogles some women, his wig comes off accidentally, and he is thrown out. Fast-forward to 1993, Corey Haim dons girls' clothes to get near his love interest in *Just One of the Girls*. We see deception concerning romantic desire. A character's trans identity is unnoticed by their love object because they seemingly blend into the expectations of hegemonic femininity or masculinity. Thus disclosure acts as an unexpected plot twist fooling innocent straight guys into falling for women who are "really men." Then the audience is expected to experience the same sense of betrayal felt by the character in the film at the moment of disclosure. The classic example is Dil in *The Crying Game* [Neil Jordan, 1992]. Or on talk shows like *Jerry Springer*.

- There's the pathetic trans person who doesn't deceive anyone. Their gender is not taken seriously, and they are considered innocuous. This role is often used to create empathy in the viewer but also revulsion: for example, John Lithgow's Oscar-nominated portrayal of ex-football-player Roberta Muldoon in *The World According to Garp* [George Roy Hill, 1982] and Terence Stamp's role as the aging showgirl Bernadette in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* [Stephen Elliott, 1994]. Even Maura Pfefferman, Jeffrey Tambor, in *Transparent* [Jill Soloway, 2014] echoes this trope.
- There is the pathological psychotic trans killer in films such as *Psycho* [Alfred Hitchcock, 1960] or the lesser known *Homicidal* [William Castle, 1961], *Dressed to Kill* [Brian De Palma, 1980], *Sleepaway Camp* [Robert Hiltzik, 1983], *The Silence of the Lambs* [Jonathan Demme, 1991], *Hit & Miss* with Chloë Sevigny [Paul Abbott, 2012], and *The Assignment* with Michelle Rodriguez [Walter Hill, 2015].

None of these are flattering, nuanced, or complicated. They reflect and intensify common tropes that teach people how to respond to trans people. For instance, in *The Crying Game*, Stephen Rae's character is not condemned for punching Dil in the face and then vomiting for forty-nine seconds of screen time. Rather, it's framed as an acceptable response to Dil having a penis. This scene has been satirized over and over in *Ace Ventura Pet Detective* [Tom Shadyac, 1994], *Soap Dish* [Michael Hoffman, 1992], and Seth MacFarlane's *Family Guy* and *The Cleveland Show* [2009]. When this is what viewers

encounter (and 86 percent say they only see trans people in film and TV), should we be surprised about the high rates of trans women being abused, threatened, or killed by the men who desire them?

Trans filmmakers and historians were hired as consultants for *The Danish Girl*. They gave concrete feedback that was completely disregarded. Meanwhile, the filmmakers say they “consulted with trans people,” giving them credibility. This logic of tokenism will never redistribute logics of power between communities and groups, trans and nontrans alike.

Alex: I know that a significant part of your research process has been to interview scholars, filmmakers, and trans activists. What else have you learned through your research interviews about the history of representing trans people?

Sam: The biggest thing for me is the dehumanization. Since trans people are outside the visual regimes of dominant power, we are seen as outside, different, and lesser than. Through that process, we are dehumanized, leading to violence. Such violence is systematically sanctioned across systems that organize public well-being, like the legal and the criminal justice system, health care industry, and employment and housing, thereby denying us our basic human rights.

Stories about marginalized people tend to be oriented around trauma, which serves to maintain status quo. A traumatic event that is part and parcel of representations of transness limits the stories being told and acts as erasure of our diverse lives, experiences, and beliefs. Trauma is vital to talk about. But when that is all we see, the individual is reduced to trauma. As activist and filmmaker Reina Gossett asks, “How do we tell the stories of people navigating enormous amounts of violence without simply reducing them to that violence?” A majority of people I interviewed recounted a specific scene from *The Jerry Springer Show* where a trans person was sensationalized, exploited, berated, or punched in the face for the amusement of the audience.

I’d like to see space made for a critical mass of trans storytellers. This is not to say, by any means, that people should not write or work or speak on behalf of another’s experience, but when there is so little in the canon, and much of what is in the canon is horrible and authored by cis people, it’s time to prioritize trans voices.

Alex: As we both know, independent media is where this prioritization can happen. What is your understanding of a possible tipping point in alternative media?

Sam: Alternative media needs the same thing: more—more trans people making more media, more stories beyond expected trans narratives, beyond hegemonic expectations of masculinity and femininity. End transness as a metaphor for mental illness and isolation, and substitute metaphors for disrupting patriarchy, misogyny, racism, and seeking radical freedom. Prioritize opportunities for trans filmmakers like funding, scholarships, skill sharing, and jobs. If a nontrans person is passionate about telling a trans story, bring trans people onto the project and listen to them. It's no secret that we aren't hired as much in this or any sector, limiting our economic opportunities and skill sets. On a personal note, I have a lot of privileges not only limited to being white and having a master's degree. And when I came out as trans while teaching at CUNY, the chair of the department (the guy who hired me and previously gave me promotions) stopped talking to me—he couldn't look me in the eye. Work conditions became unbearable. I had to leave that job.

Alex: For queer cinema, film festivals have played a critical function in both showcasing and creating audiences for alternative media.

Sam: Most trans media comes through queer film festivals. Two of my earliest favorites are Morty Diamond's film *Tranny Fags* [2003] and *By Hook or by Crook* [Silas Howard and Harry Dodge, 2001]. Diamond's film documents trans men having sex with both trans and cis queer men. Howard and Dodge's film is about a friendship between two gender-queer people. Both films star gender nonconforming people without explaining, apologizing, or pathologizing their gender. Gender is celebrated in all its beauty and confusion as the background to their lives. Such stories were the exception at the time. The most common plotline in the early 2000s were trans coming-out stories.

In 2003, when I began my first documentary film [*Boy I Am*, 2006, codirected with Julie Hollar], I watched anything with trans men I could find. They were primarily only available at queer film festivals. Most of these early indie films were made by cisgender women, documenting white trans guys through a coming-out story, family struggle, and then accessing surgery and hormones. This narrative is rooted in the medical industry's checklist of what makes a primary transsexual. While *Boy I Am* explored a larger issue (backlash toward trans men in the lesbian community), it was informed by the tropes I saw in previous films that I accepted without question. Films about trans men were programmed (at that time) with lesbian films at film festivals. The few about trans women at that time (2006–2008) were also coming-out stories with a focus on family struggle.

While traveling with and screening *Boy I Am*, I started questioning the storytelling techniques I used. Why did we need to see or know about one's assigned gender via photos or names, or see surgery, or hear about the struggle gender caused for those around trans people? Around that time, some films moved away from that narrative to document other issues in a trans person's life such as becoming a black man [Kortney Ziegler, *Still Black*, 2007], or making music [Madsen Minax, *Riot Acts*, 2009]. There were fictional shorts pushing back against expected narratives like *Falling in Love . . . with Chris & Greg* [Chris Vargas and Greg Youmans, 2008–2013] and *Trannymal & Trannymals Go to Court* [Dylan Vade Esq. and Abe Bernard, 2007].

In dominant media there is an abundance of (mostly horrible) images of trans women and a lack of trans men. Lots of trans men are starting to ask if it's better to be horribly visible or invisible. Alternatively, there were dozens of films about trans guys at queer festivals programmed by lesbians and very few about trans women. What needed to happen to make these spaces more welcoming to queer trans women?

Today, we still see coming-out stories as the main focus. However, there is more attention on movement building: portraits of trans activists and artists where the story is about the work they do. In the early to mid-2000s, most indie films were about white trans men. Now there are more about trans women of color. Indie trans fiction made by trans people is increasing, and the trans voice is clearer. In the early 2000s, we see the foundation being laid for repeating tropes and story lines in independent media. The trans subject always knew from an early age that they were trans; the film shows before and after photos; there are interviews with people in the subject's life to see how they react to the subject's transition; next come lots of tears and pain; the trans person might be isolated and sad, and then there is an epiphany—they transition, and all is right in the world; or—the tragedy—they get completely rejected by their friends and family. These films are based on a victimhood and empathy model, a very dangerous device that usually backfires. Feeling empathy and pity becomes the way for a viewer to access identification to another. Pity requires a hierarchy of personhood with a power dynamic inhibiting full human rights for trans people.

For trans audiences, these tropes might have key information they can't access elsewhere, like the effects of hormones or how best to come out to their family. But to a cis audience, the same representational tropes can reduce transness to medical transition, giving cis people the impression they're entitled to information about a transgender person's body or birth given name, or that they can ask for photos of the trans person at different stages of their

life. There is a dangerous lack of reflection because most cisgender filmmakers haven't lived through or studied the history. They enter from the side and want to tell an "interesting" story without consideration of what's come before or what is needed now. Needless to say, I continue to question if the idea of "representation" itself is bound to fail.

### The Traumatic Rupture

Alex: I just watched one of those very documentaries that you referenced above on HBO. You thought they would be over, but no, here we see that exact same documentary you've outlined above. It was about tailors, a company that makes suits for gender nonconforming clients.

Sam: Oh, *Suited* [Jason Benjamin, 2016]!

Alex: Did you see it?

Sam: Yes, a sweet idea but . . . why did we see the sexual reassignment surgery of one of the customers? What did that have to do with getting a custom-made suit for his wedding?

Alex: It reminds me of all the possibilities that must be trotted out in the first wave of visibility (the tipping point): the voyeurism, the judgment. Every single person: you have to show a picture of them as kids? Can't we just see them walking around in their beautiful suits? And we have to meet the parents and someone has to cry for every character? I thought we were done with that. But that's the thing: histories of knowing and seeing are staggered. When one community reaches a saturation point of a certain kind of story or image, it's just starting for another community.

Sam: What was the director's process? Did he look at past films and copy that? Was he just answering his own questions? Where did he learn to ask those questions? Who advised him? He was Lena Dunham's boom operator, giving him access to the kinds of institutional support that most trans filmmakers don't have.

Alex: That film was so telling. That HBO would allow a person who has no relationship to the community to have that much air time from his voyeuristic, distanced, "I don't know anything about anything" point of view. There are so many other ways this story could be and is being told. This says

something important about the tipping point. Yes, there's more visibility, but only through the tropes you mentioned before—in this case, the curious, voyeuristic outsider who is going to have big feelings: be nauseated, or laugh because it feels funny, or maybe it's gross, or maybe they will be empathetic. And the end result is “acceptance”?

Sam: The people making the suits were great, the customers were lovely, but do the participants understand the trajectory of trans storytelling that they are taking part in? What would this film have looked like if made by a trans person? What modes of trans political and representational possibility is that story keeping in place?

Alex: There is a narrative compulsion to return to a recognizable starting point that is always traumatic and then serves to ground the whole story. There was once a stability. Then there is a traumatic break when the trans person speaks the “truth” about themselves. Then their whole environment destabilizes, and the film works through this to restabilize after the family suffers and finally heals. So what happens is a story of a person's life—which could include their work, causes they care about, their favorite foods—can only be told through that moment of traumatic rupture.

Sam: The viewer needs an entry point, but this format has real-life ramifications. For instance, my friend told how their mom admonished them for never sharing their “journey.” All they could say was “it's been decades of a slow-drip kind of journey—my life.” There is not one exclusive thread of a “trans journey” or a traumatic rupture that intersected with every other part of their life.

Alex: The traumatic rupture is built around the cis members of the family. The viewer is constructed as seeing from this point of view. I think this goes back to your point about tropes and their related feelings. Every time that the expected cis viewer encounters a trans person, you are expected to experience a repulsion, confusion, bodily disorientation. These stories produce this anticipated feeling again and again. Finally, there's a resolution so that by the film's end the cis viewer gets to feel better. One of the things I noted when I was doing similar research on early AIDS media was that stories that were supposed to be about the visibility of PWAs, and “accepting” or “empathizing” with them, would inevitably show them at their sickest, at their most visibly gruesome. These images were as much about confirming how

people with AIDS are the other, and sick, while you, the viewer, anticipated as HIV-negative, is normal, as they were about kindness or respect. These images and narratives are not about the destabilization or trauma of the trans person but rather that of the cis witness.

Sam: Right, saying our only power is in the cis witness. How can “documentary” ever be an activist tool when it relies on trauma as the site of entry and pleasure? It feels good to feel bad. Feeling bad reaffirms the audience member as a caring, ethical person. Emotional response gets the audience’s attention, and despair is the easiest emotion to evoke. Tragedy, we are taught, goes hand in hand with transness.

### Trans Activism, Audience, Entertainment

Alex: Along these lines, dominant films imagine a cisgender viewer that does not view trans subjects as sexually interesting or as visually desirable. But you can also make films for a different cis audience, one who finds trans people all gussied up in their lovely suits as appealing.

Sam: Making films for queer and trans audiences assumes a level of identification, desire, and understanding that people fear will alienate cis viewers. But that idea is also pretty flat. As my friend and filmmaker Silas Howard says, “I’m not French, but I can see a French film. I’m not a shark, but I can watch *Jaws*.”

Alex: Part of activist media making, as I’ve thought about it, is that the media maker needs clear commitments about their anticipated viewer. Certainly one anticipated viewer for activist media can be the dominant public. You can make an activist film to convince them of something. But there’s also activist media that’s made internally for communities.

Sam: In this case, the point of rupture that takes the viewer from disgust to acceptance/identification isn’t needed. Let’s make films that could be of use (to empower, educate, support, be a tool) for a transgender viewer or those invested in our human rights. I have never anticipated a dominant audience, and to a large extent, I don’t desire it, because of what it requires to sell. At the same time, my career can only go so far before I need a larger audience, to access funding, distribution, and to pay my rent. We are in a moment of possibility, where more people from all walks of life want to learn about and see stories about trans people’s lives.

Alex: There are people in our movements who are capable of speaking to a broader public, and they should do that work. And then there's people like me, and I'm certainly not capable of that work! I don't think one is more politically correct or one is right or wrong. Movements need both. AIDS activist video was a successful media movement in part because even when it had its "tipping point"—and now it's even enjoying a second tipping point—when there was mainstream visibility and curiosity, at the very same time, an active body of work was being made within and for the movement. Those two things were connected. That said, the window where the mainstream is interested to fund and support you is very small, so you should go for it, if it's there now!

### Activist Media Success

Sam: Can you elaborate on the success of activist media you were doing / are doing around HIV/AIDS. What does success mean? What does/did it look like?

Alex: In relationship to activist media about HIV/AIDS, I think of success when, for a short window of time, dominant society's ideas about how to know and think about HIV/AIDS was, at least in part, being controlled by us. At that time, we changed some of the terms and some of the understandings of AIDS in our culture. For instance, we created, defined, used, and promoted the terms *PWA* (person with AIDS) and *safer sex*. From controlling language, political and social change occurred. Then, when we stepped away from naming things, showing things, telling things, from our point of view, the agenda shifted right back to where it was. So, I learned that it's a constant job, to monitor and try to control how we are represented, and we did walk away from that, mostly because people were dying and sad.

But we did create a voice that we fought hard for and used for many of the years of the conversation. And that is a position I think that trans media is in right now, naming terms (alongside others), naming the questions. Trans people can play some part in the direction of the society's understandings as long as the movement stays diligent and makes a lot of media, as long as trans people participate in the staying visible.

That's the other job of activist media: to implicate and educate. The fact that our political movements for human autonomy and justice aren't deeply held by most people in this society is mysterious to me. We don't need empathy; instead, our work is successful when we help others see that they are

implicated because they live in an unjust society where some people have access to things and others don't. Once implicated, we can all be better educated about the unjust systems that mete out dignity, representation, authority, and humanity.

Sam: People seem to reject stories that focus on their implication but embrace a story that helps them access feelings of empathy via a sustained difference. They can leave the theater thinking they have done their part, had their feelings. And they are not responsible for any more work toward justice and equality.

### The Efficacy of Media Activism

Sam: I'm starting to question the efficacy of media activism!

Alex: Don't say that here in this essay! [laughter] But really, what do you mean?

Sam: Witnessing the dominant media's focus on trans people's lives now as a "hot new trend" really hits home. Some activist voices are being heard, but will it last? Will queer and trans media makers with the privilege of money and power continue to exploit those of us who have less money and power like I experienced with Lana Wachowski, and David France is known to do? Will trans people of color have equal access to representational autonomy?

Here's a very short recap of my experience with Wachowski to give context. After I finished the film *Kate Bornstein Is a Queer & Pleasant Danger* [2014], Wachowski approached me about making it more accessible to the mainstream. After a few months, I wasn't on board with her storytelling decisions because they echoed the tropes mentioned earlier. So we parted ways. However, she kept the footage I shot before I even met her. Four years' worth of footage I funded on an adjunct salary! She refused to return the footage. If she uses it, I won't have the resources to stop her.

Alex: As you know, there are activist practices for making media, not simply activist content. You make this very clear in your difficult story above. When the making feels empowering, collective building, when in the process you are engaged in a world where all are implicated and all enjoy the dignity of access to full personhood and linked expression, that's activism in and of itself. We are changed in that process. And the object itself, the video, does it change the world? I'm less sure about that as a simple one-to-one equation.

As someone who has been engaged in several past media movements that I now see being historicized, I find that individual media activists might not alone, or in one video, make change. But we are players in a much larger constellation, and we have an important role there, in our movements. Without our images, movements can't run on all cylinders because the people who we are engaged with, in opposition with, have media at their disposal! Without us, we'd only have *their* images. Right? So, you should make activist media! Your images feed us. And you need to be fed! Are there key moments in the history of trans activist media that have sustained you?

Sam: Yes. In 1970, a controversial activist named Angela Douglas (she ran TAO, Transsexual Action Organization, a major US transgender group at the time) organized a protest of *Myra Breckinridge* because of the cis casting. In 2016, Jen Richards is the voice of that issue.

The iconic video of Sylvia Rivera holding her ground while getting shooed and booed by gays and lesbians at a gay liberation rally in 1973. That video has become a touchstone for so many people because it shows the lack of support and resistance trans activists received from the larger lesbian and gay movement. I think about Lou Sullivan on early '90s talk shows. He was repeatedly denied sexual reassignment surgery and hormones because he identified as a gay man.

After testing positive for HIV, he wrote, "I took a certain pleasure in informing the gender clinic that even though their program told me I could not live as a Gay man, it looks like I'm going to die like one."<sup>1</sup> Loren Cameron's cover photo on his book, *Body Alchemy* [1996], was the first time I saw an image of someone injecting testosterone. There is Christine Jorgensen on the cover of the *Daily News*. Les Feinberg speaking to crowds with ze's fist in the air and visiting CeCe McDonald in prison, bringing awareness to the Free CeCe campaign. I revel in the image of Reina Gosset and Liz Bishop during the New York City Trans Day of Action. Reina is holding a sign that says, "This is our Life, This is our Time." There's Jennicet Gutiérrez speaking up during Obama's LGBT victory speech in 2015. She got heckled in the same way Silvia did in 1973, which spread quickly through social media.

### **Trans Media Activism / Feminist Media Activism**

Alex: Can you further discuss the links between trans media activism and feminist and queer activism? For example, feminist filmmaking has always understood that communities of care in production are part of feminist film production.

Sam: I think it's important that trans media activism is reflected in the production, in the ethics of interviews and conversation, in skill sharing, hiring, and how we treat our team when making work. It comes down to the dissemination of power, working in a collaborative, accountable space, hiring people invested in the topic, job training, mentorship, making space to see how people are feeling—a holistic sense of care and responsibility for each other within the production. Being transparent about how things come to fruition, funding, and budget, how decisions are made. I give my subjects editorial power over their image. If they say something they regret in the moment or a month later, I will delete it. And I believe in offering compensation for any professional exchange.

Alex: When I made *We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS* [1990] with a collective of women in New York City, we worked together for six months. I couldn't pay people, but I did give them train fare and food at every meeting. We then got a distribution grant to show the film and as part of that paid everyone who showed the film (in their own communities) a fee for that work. So I'm totally with you here, Sam, about paying people for their time, knowledge, and labor! This is only one way to manifest my understanding of feminist filmmaking, and film theory awareness of power is written into all aspects of media making. This is opposed to most filmmaking that has historically and still does pretend there is no power at stake, or that even if there is, it doesn't really matter, leading to ruthless abuses of the camera's, filmmaker's, and cinema's power. This also goes to dominant practices for depicting people as well. Our responsibility as activist, feminist media makers is to also think about remaking or unmaking those traditional dynamics that produce images where power is written into what and who we see. We seek power relations that are not unidirectional—from camera to subject, from viewer to image. Rather we seek transparency and activist practices that attend to how cinematic interactions are colonial or objectifying or dominating because power structures the scene of seeing and being seen. Keeping these structures foremost in your mind, do you think of your work on this film and others as activism? Do you think of your research as activism?

Sam: Yes, researching and documenting something that hasn't been prioritized before is part of my activist goals.

Alex: Activism needs these images and ideas. Artists and theorists think about, articulate, and share complicated ideas that motivate and educate

people, and from that activism occurs. So the media is protoactivism: it inspires, initiates, sets into motion. Activism is when somebody takes this and then goes to the streets, or cares for another or themselves, changes a law, says no at a particularly important moment. Artists register and express the ideas of the moment, and movement, in ways that people who aren't artists dearly need (and to be clear, I think everyone can, and should be an artist. Expressing ideas about our world, or communities, or experiences is one of those core human rights that all should have equal access to. Thus, expanding access to art making/personal expression is one of my core activist goals).

### **Intersectionality, Commodification, and More Questions**

Alex: Do you think there is something unique about trans media activism? Something that makes it different from feminist or queer activism, antiracist media activism, the other identity-based movements that we are familiar with?

Sam: I don't think it is isolated from any of those movements. Trans people are feminists, queer, lesbian, and gay, of all ethnicities and races and citizenship, class, ability, religion, etc. Trans activism is inherently dealing with all those issues.

Alex: Yes, some of the earlier media activist movements took longer to understand that each one of those discrete "identity" positions was deeply written into each of the others and also laced through movements. Or maybe because trans media activism's "tipping point" comes so much later in history, it can't help but begin from that place of intersectional knowledge. So, maybe that's a wonderful legacy from which to end this conversation! What else did you learn?

Sam: The trajectory of other social movements and their media activism—for instance, the one you were part of with HIV/AIDS. The growing social awareness around the murders of trans women, specifically trans women of color, via social media is a success of that model. I am still wrestling with if commodification is inevitable for a social movement. What happens to the movement and the individual once they become commodified? How do we talk about the history of an identity-based movement when we're using a context and language that is changing so rapidly? And there are more questions: Is there any way to avoid the singular story when we are dealing with mass

media? What does the past for trans people tell us about contemporary trans lives? What do contemporary lives tell us about the past?

Joanne Meyerowitz argues that the “Christine Jorgensen story also captured public attention because it highlighted a number of key tensions of the mid-twentieth century. It pointed, for example, to the promise of science in the atomic age.”<sup>2</sup> Nearly seventy years later, we can flip that and wonder how technology vis-à-vis social media points to the promise of trans media activism. How do technological images inform *how* we create our own identity? What are the intersections of media technology and the science of medical transition and identity? Lots of questions arise as I continue to research, and even while having this conversation. Thanks, Alex.

### Coda: June 2018

Sam: Since this interview, more articles and books have been published about trans history and visibility, and a few videos have gone viral. Fears that came up in 2016 have come to fruition, like increased legislative backlash. Meanwhile, the #metoo movement opened the doors to Trace Lysette and Van Barns speaking their truths about transphobic and misogynist violence working on *Transparent*. Amazon fired Jeffrey Tambor, but Netflix only took action against him when a cis woman spoke up about Tambor’s abuse. Prime-time television game changers like *Pose*, starring five trans women of color, have premiered; a black trans male director, Yance Ford, was nominated for an Oscar for his documentary [*Strong Island* 2017]; and a Chilean film about a Chilean trans woman played by a white Chilean trans woman won an Oscar [*Fantastic Woman* 2017].

Continuing my research, I’ve added over eight hundred film and TV titles with trans characters to watch. I’ve raised money to hire four trans research assistants. We will make all the data public on the internet. My producer, Amy Scholder, and I continue to build our team of consulting producers, editors, and community advisers, and a lawyer working on deferred payment: he is the one and only straight, white, cis guy on our team and has proven himself to be a dedicated ally.

We’ve prioritized hiring trans people. This is particularly astounding when trans people are an overwhelmingly underemployed demographic within the industry. This required months of labor dedicated to casting a wide net using all of our social and professional networks and paying a competitive day rate—a place where a lot of indie productions cut corners, thereby limiting crew opportunities to people who can get by without being paid and thus

limiting opportunities to develop skills for further employment for many. Paying our crew is our largest expense to date.

On top of this, we have a fellowship program for trans crew to build out their skills. Cis people hired for key crew roles mentor trans fellows. And our documentary subjects receive honorariums for sharing their time and ideas. We've applied for twenty-three grants and received four, have had cultivation and fundraising parties, and have invested our own savings as well as private donations. I've given about half a dozen public lectures and presentations based on the research materials. Laverne Cox was in attendance at a presentation in July 2017. From there she asked to chat about being involved (a dream for us!), and she's now our executive producer. Her steadfast commitment to advocacy plus her extensive knowledge of trans history make her the ideal producing partner for this film.

Looking back on our conversation from two years ago, I see the themes about activist trans media making that are now centrally defining this project: a commitment to employing trans and q poc crew while training fellows, researching in collaboration, and practicing grassroots fundraising in order to not compromise our vision.

## Notes

1. Liz Highleyman, "Who Was Lou Sullivan?" *Seattle Gay News*, February 22, 2008, [http://sgn.org/sgnnews36\\_08/mobile/page30.cfm](http://sgn.org/sgnnews36_08/mobile/page30.cfm). Archived from the original on November 4, 2015.
2. Joanne Meyerowitz, "Transforming Sex: Christine Jorgensen in the Postwar U.S.," *OAH Magazine of History* 20, no. 2, *History of Sexuality* (March 2006):16–20.