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On not really being there: trans* presence/absence in *Dallas Buyers Club*

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**ABSTRACT**

Recently more trans characters, even as main protagonists, star in film and media representations, perhaps in tandem with an increased recognition of trans rights globally. In this article we argue that the visual and aural grammars of cinema perform a double movement of inclusion and elision, making for a fascinating if utterly frustrating uptake of trans presence that is at once, perforce, also an absence. Our case study of the Rayon character in *Dallas Buyers Club* is an example of a recent sexualized representation of trans femininity. Our textual analysis will deconstruct this character’s presence and absence on the level of the film’s aesthetical and technical aspects demonstrating how cinematic grammar implicates cisgenderism.

**Introduction**

Popular media has long drawn on trans* characters and stereotypes to bring spectacular figures to the screen (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* 1975), to add spoof comedy to television (*Little Britain* 2003–2006), and justify bloody tragedy on crime thrillers (*CSI Miami* 2002–2012). Recently more trans characters, even as main protagonists, star in film and media representations, perhaps in tandem with an increased recognition of trans rights globally. The near universal celebration of actress Laverne Cox’s portrayal of trans woman character Sophia Burset on the award-winning Netflix series *Orange is the New Black* (*OITNB* 2013–2019) heralded a new trend in mainstream, popular screen cultures. Soon after in 2014, Amazon’s Primetime show *Transparent* (2014–2018) garnered attention from all the major award bodies and recently launched season three to critical acclaim. Though the starring trans woman character Maura Pfefferman is played by a cisgender man, trans creatives are present at all levels of production and on-set, who give shape and direction to the way trans characters are depicted. In comparison, Hollywood’s predominantly cisgender film industry seems to lag behind with involving trans people in decision-making positions on productions and in front of the camera, with dire consequences. Major pictures do not lack trans characters per se (played of course still by cisgender actors); only consider Bree Osborne in *Transamerica*
Nevertheless, we argue, the visual and aural grammars of cinema orchestrated by cisgender perspectives perform a double movement of inclusion and elision, making for a fascinating if utterly frustrating uptake of trans presence that is at once, perforce, also an absence.

Following the celebratory tone surrounding the Primetime Emmy Awards in August 2014 when *OITNB* swept the ceremony, the December Academy Award evening when Jared Leto won an Oscar for supporting actor in the role of Rayon in the *Dallas Buyers Club* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2013) was extremely jarring for trans audiences. In his acceptance speech Leto did not even mention the word transgender, much less thank the various trans people who had helped him prepare for the role. One could decry the invisible labor of trans activists who lost their lives to AIDS, or the continuance of cisgender creatives siphoning off trans cultures. *Dallas Buyers Club* (hereafter *DBC*) also unfortunately draws on a highly sexualized version of trans femininity that tempt/disgust cisgender men, already well-developed in characters like Dil from *The Crying Game* (1992), Kitten in *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005), and even in Xavier Dolan’s artful *Laurence Anyways* (2012). One must critique this problematically narrow version of trans femininity for a cisgender eye, as well as acknowledge the exclusion of trans masculinity in storylines about desire. Moreover, many have denounced the obvious problem of cisgender actors playing trans bringing little backstory or personal understanding to these roles, or worse, as something analogous to white actors doing blackface, called “transface” (Daniel Reynolds 2015). We agree that all these issues are present in *DBC* and more widely in media ventures looking to cash-in on only the most superficial markers of transness in a rush to capitalize on trans chic. Nevertheless, as transfeminist film scholars attentive to how gender ideologies underwrite cinematic perception we see these as extenuating, though important, issues to the filmic text itself. Namely, cinematic grammars implicated by cisgenderism make an argument to the spectator about how to see a trans person as a less than full person relative to cisgender standards. Thus in this article we show the ways in which certain cinematic elements of *DBC* deny the onscreen, diegetic reality and value of Rayon. The close analysis of these elements enables us to more accurately critique the shortcomings of *DBC* as a semi-fictionalized account of socio-political events. In the first section we analyze the film’s opening scene in terms of its cinematic voice and body (Heath) to explain our overarching methodological approach that combines trans studies insights into body politics with tools to study film bodies. Subsequently, we turn to the question of character development to show how the narratological function of trans operates in the text, followed by a close reading of the visual demarcation of Rayon through cinematographic means. We conclude with an assessment of cinema’s potential to ‘body forth’ different kinds of trans identities, expressions, and perceptions, that is, to bring trans cinematic bodies into being.

**Denial of fullness in enunciation**

Opening sequences of films can be understood as foreshadowing events, themes, motifs, and issues to come, and as such provides a key guideline, or manual, on how to read and what to look for in a film (Thomas Elsaesser 2012, 115). In the very first shot of *DBC*, the spectator is aligned with its main character, Ron Woodroof (Matthew McConaughey), through the use of a point-of-view shot (See Figure 1 below). Compressed between dark, haze-producing slats we are presented with a blurred vision of a man carrying a large American flag atop a powerful Quarter horse.
In the remainder of that first scene of *DBC*, we continue to follow Ron at a Dallas rodeo. He engages in a sexual act (with two women), and after this, we see him making some extra money on the side (he’s an electrician) by setting up bets with rodeo riders. When he stands to lose one of these bets, he makes a run for it, and has himself willfully arrested by a sympathetic police officer. When he is dropped off at his trailer park home (instead of going to jail), he instantly passes out in the middle of his trailer. These short scenes framed the main character by rodeo culture: his preferences (smoking, drinking, fucking) and his actions (hustling, gambling, cheating). The film will use these traits set up at the beginning and elaborate on them throughout the film: it will show us further (attempts) at sexual encounters, the way money is used and abused and the (semi-) legality of the protagonist’s actions, and, finally, how he tries to outsmart figures of authority and the law. As such *DBC* adheres to the formal rules of a film’s exposition, clustering its main character and themes explicitly.5

However, an added salient detail in this opening sequence is the way sound helps the viewer to constitute an even more subjective connection with Ron. The film’s opening shot, the subjective point-of-view shot, is further underscored by the use of internal diegetic sound: sound that comes from inside the mind of a character.6 The viewer hears a slowly increasing high-pitched noise, indicating physical uneasiness, pain, or even danger. This is a highly subjective type of sound, suggested as what Ron experiences in his head. By positioning the viewer on a visual as well as aural level with Ron, it is immediately clear that the film will exclusively favor this character’s position of knowledge, or put differently, Ron will be the character the spectator is forced to identify with right from the beginning of the film.7 Conversely, the audience does not have a chance to see or feel with the trans* character Rayon in the same way, experiencing her sickness and desires. She oscillates throughout the film between a secondary presence and muted absence in relation to Ron’s noted Texan heterosexuality, never coming into a full enunciation in the film, let alone becoming the privileged point of recognition and knowledge for the spectator. Rayon’s incomplete
presence raises the question of how the film differentiates bodies according to a cisgender and overtly heterosexual perspective.

In his 1979 essay *Body, Voice*, film theorist Stephen Heath analyses instances of the presence of people in films that offers a succinct set of tools and problems relevant to *DBC*. Throughout his film theoretical writings, Heath is particularly interested in the problem of ideology in cinema. His main contention is that cinema creates the illusion of a coherent subject position for the spectator through a specific signifying practice. In order to critique this illusion of coherence, the analyst must deconstruct the text. Heath observes how films are “full of people,” but questions, “what is this ‘fullness’ of people in films?” (Stephen Heath 1981, 178). In response, he delineates a number of categories operative in narrative fiction film: the agent, the character, the person, the image and, lastly, the figure. Seen within the particular context of narrative film, both agent as well as character are predominantly understood in the sense of narrative agency, their role in the action of a narrative. Person and image, though, basically relate to the individual playing the agent or character, which in the former case would be a human actor, and in the latter, a star, whose presence lends a “luminous sense” to the character (1981, 181). Finally, the category of the figure takes up all the previous categories and unites them in a certain constellation, an order of importance and in a historical point in time.

However, Heath is quick to state that this type of categorization of a figure has its limits, most certainly when it comes to thinking about the complete capture of a body within any one of these categories. His explanation of the fragmented body, alongside the already noted positioning of the spectator with Ron’s point of view, helps us to understand how the presences of Rayon/Ron (Leto/McConaughey) fracture along different lines:

The body in films is also moments, intensities, outside a simple constant unity of the body as a whole, the property of a some one; films are full of fragments, bits of bodies, gestures, desirable traces, fetish points. (1981, 183)

The uneven presence of the body is as crucial in Hollywood narrative film as it is in pornographic film, Heath goes on to stress, and as such, it is necessary to, “explore conditions of presence, since understanding in this area has important implications for alternative practices of cinema” (1981, 183). Exploring the conditions of how a body becomes *presenced* will point to the myriad ways in which people and their bodies are represented differentially in film. People in film, Heath stresses, “are always in systems of representation, are always part of an enunciation, for that and never ‘immediate’ or ‘themselves’” (1981, 183–184). This article takes its cue from Heath’s observation on the importance of a close analysis of the systems of representation (an enunciation and its conditions). Cinema in particular offers an important site for analyzing the imaging of trans bodies, for it follows what Susan Stryker (2013) has termed, “the cinematic logic of transsexual embodiment,” with correspondences between the activities of a film production’s cutting room and an operation room. In both cases she sees the cutting of the physical medium of the body/image, the splicing of images together in new ways, and the projecting of the medium so that it becomes a public way to tell a story through those constructed images.⁸ In our analysis of *DBC*, we reverse course to start with the film’s mode of presencing in order to trace out the cisgender logic of cinematic trans embodiment.

Here, we understand the film text to be of crucial importance in the analysis of the bodily presence (and absence) of the trans* character Rayon. Given that cinema is a signifying practice creating a certain presence, as Heath states, the political question is, “how and to
what extent is it possible to transform those conditions, that presence?” (1981, 191). Even though we do not set out to address this issue specifically in this essay, it remains in the background of our analysis. The film offers different manifestations of presence, visually, bodily on the one hand and aurally, through the voice, on the other. Heath does not elaborate in great detail on the concept of voice, apart from the observation that the voice constitutes a different condition of presence (1981, 178); hence, we look to how the voice as a critical aspect of an embodied subject has special valence in Transgender Studies.

In Transgender Studies Quarterly (TSQ’s) “Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies” issue (May 2014), Andrew Anastasia foregrounds the use of voice as a keyword in relation to the acts of listening and hearing as opposed to the more formative, metaphorical use of voice as “the agency by which an opinion is expressed, and the expressed will of a people” (2014, 262). Instead, he states, the voice an sich needs to be the focus of attention. One needs to listen to the actual voice, its vibrations and the way a voice can “pierce us in unexpected ways” (2014, 262). Here, voice is akin to though not necessarily conjunct to physical presence; Anastasia remarks that with regard to “how others make sense of a trans* voice, especially relative to one’s physical appearance, [it] can provoke great anxiety or pleasure” (2014, 262). This suggests a potential fracture with and fetishization of voice as a trace of the body. In our approach to trans figures in film, we look at how the presencing of the Rayon trans figure’s voice in DBC fails to both embody the agency of a represented people and provokes more anxiety than pleasure in the context of the film.

Our analysis of the Rayon character takes these aspects of body and voice into account, not to demonstrate the limitations of this representation, which are numerous (and which we do above, briefly), but to point out how, in what ways, this partial, unfulfilling presence is constituted within the film text in politically pernicious ways. In the following sections, we first deploy a narratological analysis of Rayon, where the idea of presence will be approached through the concepts of character (a composite, a helper), plot (cause and effect), and agency. Second, the analysis will deconstruct Rayon’s presence and absence, onscreen and offscreen, in focus and out of focus, on the level of the film’s aesthetical and technical aspects, primarily in its mise-en-scène (staging) and cinematography.

A character study: composite, helper, trans* mammy?

Our analysis of Rayon begins with the notion that she is a fictitious character embedded in a historical storyline about the actual, global AIDS crisis experienced on the local level of Dallas, Texas. Unlike the real-life Ron Woodroof, Rayon and Dr Eve Saks (Jennifer Garner) are both composite characters created by writers Craig Borton and Melisa Wallack after interviewing multiple transgender activists and doctors who faced similar struggles with accessing drugs and administering care (Aisha Harris 2013). The writers created Rayon as a foil to Ron, a character whose generosity he learns from, but who also challenges his homophobia so that as the hero he may undergo a transformation (Harris 2013). The disease and its discourse ignite already prevalent sexual and racial prejudices; Ron is shown to conquer both the illness and its social ills. In this sense, Rayon is not only a composite, but forms the position of the “helper” or ally, a key figure accompanying the hero who themselves has no major emotional or narrative arc but is the catalyst (Christopher Booker 2004).

That the main and supporting character hierarchy maps onto social inequalities is typical in Hollywood fare. Steve Friess (2014) responded to the Academy’s celebration of Rayon’s
“brave portrayal” by reminding us that back in 1940 African American Hattie McDaniel won an Oscar for her portrayal of Mammy in *Gone With The Wind*. He argues that 20 years from now the “sassy, tragic-yet-silly Rayon will belong in the dishonorable pantheon along with McDaniel’s Mammy” and charges the film with producing a “crude throwback of a less aware era” (2014, n/p). We submit that the multiple levels of spectator (dis)satisfaction with the character of Rayon stems mainly from the composition of her gendered and sexualized persona as being less than and subservient to the hetero patriarch. As we explain below, the trans* mammy is strikingly similar to racialized forms of mammyism.

Cast as a white but poverty-stricken, gender non-conforming person *DBC* paints Rayon as someone with multiple afflictions, with her trans identity and drug abuse ultimately being her true sources of suffering rather than having AIDS. For his part, Ron shows disgust at her “weakness” in relation to both her femininity and drug addiction, despite the fact that he is a known drug user. Leto acknowledges that the writers scripted Rayon as a composite gay cross-dresser and drag queen, whereas he decided to play her as a trans woman who wishes to transition physically and live full-time as a woman (Diane Anderson-Minshall 2013, n/p). He goes on to call her representative of “the Rayons of this world, of gays and lesbians,” further evidencing his confusion between gender and sexual identity. Rayon’s scripted “girl” look borrows heavily from the iconography of the fabulous drag queen (wigs, heavy makeup, and sexy clothing) and cross-dressing (fetishistic shots of her at the mirror, caressing her clothing). No discussion of her desires for hormones or surgical procedures is included, but neither does she give name to a desire not to transition. Rather than reflect the fluidity of 80s trans cultures in which to be a queen could include being gay or a partial bodily transformation, the character of Rayon appears a composite of sexualized stereotypes about various gender non-conforming identities, practices, and desires. Her defining features as a street-wise sex worker with a heart of gold underscores how unimaginative a trope Rayon actually is.

The plot relies entirely on Rayon being a productive “helper” to realizing Ron’s ambitions: she is the cause to every effect in birthing, maintaining, and saving the buyers’ club. She first gives Ron the idea to charge other sick people for access to AIDS medications, she then recruits club members from the disproportionately afflicted queer community, and finally she sells her life insurance to her father in order to keep the club going in the face of high court fees. From the standpoint of the narrative arc, it is hard to fathom how, when it is her idea, her people, and her money, that *DBC* became, in the words of Jack Mirkinson “a film in which the hero of the AIDS movement is a straight bigot who helps educate all of the people he once despised about how to treat themselves and fight the system” (2014, n/p). Regarding its stunning historical reversal of cause and effect, Mirkinson points out that “[i]n its haste to canonize Ron Woodroof […] it almost entirely erases the real saints of that fight: the men and women of the LGBT community who saved their own lives” (2014, n/p). A last dialogue between Rayon and Ron produces this dizzying inversion: as she gives him the cash from her life insurance, he formally extends his hand, she then pulls him in for a hug and whispers in his ear, “thank you.” Surely Ron should be thanking Rayon who performs this last sacrifice before she dies, but not when the character of Rayon must be the ever-grateful helper acting in the service of the savior patriarch.

The film marks Ron as aggressively heterosexual, in contrast, Rayon has no specific sexual identity of her own. On *DBC*’s website Leto speaks in the video “Making Rayon Real” about how he felt Rayon was someone who “wants to be loved, to love,” yet her only on-screen
seduction is of Ron as a kind of John, unmistakably in a car in the area she works in. Rather than a straightforward sexual seduction, she tries to sell him on the value of her assistance, lending a sexual edge to her servicing role for Ron. Akkadia Ford suggests that Rayon pays for her gendered and sexual transgressions with the punishing narrative arc of a ruined, “‘fallen woman’ who must eventually die” (2016, 135). Parker Marie Molloy argues that “the outcry against Rayon in Dallas Buyer’s Club is less about Jared Leto playing a trans woman, and more about an industry where Rayon is the only trans woman allowed to exist” (2014, n/p). Rayon fulfills the predominant trans tropes Molloy offers: a sex worker, a deceptive trap for hetero men, and a dead body.

Though Leto states he understands that “this type of role is usually only treated as comedic relief,” and that “I was intent on putting a real person up on the screen, and not a cliché,” further examination suggests Leto embodies a highly clichéd trans mammy (Anderson-Minshall 2013, n/p). Where Friess provocatively suggests that despite her whiteness Rayon can be likened to a Black Mammy, Joelle Ruby Ryan (2009) takes the analogy even further. She analyzes a series of films that produce the specific visual and narrative repertoires of the “Transgender Mammy,” a gender-variant character marked by servility and allegiance to hegemony, who becomes defanged through comedic affects and sexual dysfunction or asexuality. Given the caveat that racial difference is not analogous to gender difference, it remains worthwhile to compare the conditions in which different kinds of “mammies” result from the projection of racial anxieties or sexual anxieties operative in society.

The history of African American mammies on-screen derives from a larger structuring mythology of race and gender, having its heyday in the 1930s during the era of Jim Crow laws. Like the fantasy of the kindly helpmate of the white family found in “Aunt Jemima”-types, transgender mammies are present to care for their ruling cisgender class. Rayon fulfills this role in the context of the AIDS crisis, for instance in tending to Ron when he is sick and to run the people side of the buyers’ club office in the hotel. A cousin to the helpful aunties, Spike Lee comments that the “Magical Negro” is a guardian angel figure who saves the day with “great powers but who can’t use them to help themselves or their own people but only for the benefit of the white stars of the movies” (quoted in Ryan 2009, 183 footnote 4). Similarly Rayon’s relationship with Ron is marked by her ability to solve his problems, suggesting she is a “Magical Tranny” who amazingly swoops in with the necessary money just in time. The character of Rayon is also positioned to be the educator of Ron, a mammy function to promote acceptance and dispense free expertise to cisgender people who otherwise treat them horribly (Ryan 2009, 129). Like the Black mammy, the trans mammy presents the myth of deriving happiness and meaning from subordination to the hegemonic ruling class.

Insightfully, trans activist Riki Wilchins comments on the addition of camp characters to a film as a means of deflecting the “viewers’ discomfort from old, outdated stereotypes by introducing new, outdated stereotypes” (quoted in Ryan 2009, 133). Leto’s achievement of a starved feminine body performing non-threatening acts of seduction and care work shows the spectator once again damaging myths—“oh, this old thing” (T. L. Cowan 2015, 165)—of trans feminine bodies bearing the brunt of sexism and violence against women, virulent transmisogyny, and the criminalization of sex work. The trans body is still read through the prism of the mythological image and Leto’s attempted presencing through body and voice lacks any critique of the structured inequalities that produce Rayon’s presence. No wonder then that trans spectators have questioned, “are we still dealing with this old thing?” of the
comedic-tragic trans prostitute. In Cowan’s words, performers who take on trans roles should embody these “criminally deviant or iconically tragic figures in need of rescue” only in an effort “to jam the machinery of image production … to mark the specificity of what is elided” (2015, 172). Known for his long hair and lilted southern voice that could lend a luminous sheen to Rayon’s realness, Leto might have embodied a more complex version of the trans woman myth. Instead, he ascribes the weight-loss, waxing, and achievement of Rayon’s voice as mere “physical challenges” for a cisgender actor rather than related to historical practices of gender transitioning (Anderson-Minshall 2013).

Despite the shortcomings of the narrative placement and development of the Rayon character it is worth evaluating whether the formal framing of Rayon by the cinematography and mise-en-scene offer any contradictions or further cement the subordinate helper role. So how does Rayon appear, what kind of cinematographic presence does she have in the film?

The positioning of presence: imaging manifestations of a trans character

Here we focus on the visual presence of Rayon constituted in the text of the film by performing a close analysis of four key scenes that represent the full spectrum of the narrative development (resulting in the inevitable decline and death) of Rayon. The scenes we will focus on are the introduction of the Rayon character, a group scene in the buyer club’s makeshift office, a confrontation in the supermarket between Ron and a friend, and finally, a scene that anticipates Rayon’s death and its aftermath. Through this analysis, we will uncover the ways in which DBC positions the spectator with Ron and how the character of Rayon is persistently denied full presence.

In the introduction to this essay, we analyzed the first shots of the film, highlighting the importance of a film’s opening sequence, from which we argued that the spectator is firmly aligned with the character of Ron. The appearance of Rayon after about 30 minutes of screen time puts the previously established point of view with Ron in a different light. Ron has been taken into hospital and is in bed; even in his miserable physical state, he tries to impress and flirt with his female doctor, Eve. After Eve walks away from him, the film’s second notable female character is introduced. Before we see her, we hear Rayon’s voice from behind the curtain, saying, “Honey, you don’t have the slightest chance.” Only then does she open the curtain to reveal herself (see Figure 2).

The introduction of a character by way of a disembodied voice is of course nothing novel. Similarly, the “reveal” of a character by opening a curtain falls into an analogous category of dramatic gesture. For a brief moment, Rayon is privileged as a body-less voice, free of the constraints of her physical body. This potentially powerful position (the voice behind the curtain, not unlike in Victor Fleming’s 1939 classic The Wizard of Oz) is however, promptly corrected. Ron, and the spectator with him, is presented with the “failing” femininity of Rayon. She is presented with short hair tied back under a scarf, wearing a pink dressing gown over her flat chest, and overdone make-up. All of which contribute to our understanding she is not a “real” woman. The dialogue confirms this is also Ron’s point of view: she says, “I’m Rayon,” to which Ron nastily replies, “congratulations, now fuck off.” Additionally, the husky “Honey” that adds a feminine touch now seems in contrast to her physical embodiment, and therefore adds drama to her reveal as a double reveal of her so-called true sex designated at birth by the appearance of one’s genital morphology. Danielle M. Seid (2014, 176) explains this as
the trans moment in which normative standards of sex/gender truth are brought to bear on a trans body that is shown to be other than it is presented, in this case by a voiced feminine use of language, a timbre that provokes hostile anxiety.

In this scene, two recurring motifs that encapsulate the problematic relationship between Ron and Rayon are firmly established. First, Ron’s physical uneasiness that leads to his disavowal of Rayon’s femininity and second, the exchange of money as a way to temporarily by-pass that discomfort. Their first interaction is playing a game of cards with a betting pool, during which Rayon beats Ron. An exchange of money takes place. Sensing they may share a similar interest, Rayon tells Ron about the clinical trial for AZT and how to make money by peddling their prescription drugs to other infected people. As the scene progresses, the talk about money and the exchange of it appears to loosen Ron up. Then when he gets a cramp in his leg, Rayon is quick to help him by providing water and a massage, then making off with her winnings. (See Figures 3, 4, and 5).

The rapport between Ron and Rayon is underscored by the cinematography, since they are captured in the same frame. This may lead the viewer to believe that this might be the beginning of a beautiful friendship, albeit one based on both characters’ penchant for money. It is striking that Ron’s uneasiness with Rayon actually seems to be least present in this introductory scene that cements their identification and a one-way relationship of intimate, physical care. In the following scenes that we will analyze, the distance between Rayon and Ron becomes more pronounced through the film’s construction of their differentiated bodily presence, which results in Rayon fading into a disembodied absence.

After having set up their buyers’ club, Ron and Rayon conduct their business from a motel. This transient space allows them to pack and leave on short notice, if the circumstances demand. The location of a cheap roadside motel evokes deeper connoted meanings for a devious, sexual space, which is further worked out in aspects of the mise-en-scene. At this point in the film, Ron’s buyers’ club is attracting more and more customers. Rayon’s part in all of this remains vague, she appears to be an unspecified liaison with fellow sex workers and members of the gay and trans community who have contracted HIV and could become

Figure 2. Introduction of Rayon.
members of the buyers’ club. The lack of development of this storyline is startling given the history of HIV being known as the “gay disease” when it was first identified. The staging of this scene indicates that in their working relationship Ron is in charge and that the Rayon character is simultaneously a part and apart from the main plotline of the story (the selling of alternative medicine to HIV patients). As the shot below shows, a triangle forms between Ron, Eve, and Rayon, literalized in the geometric framing of their bodies here (see Figure 6). Even though all three characters share the same frame, Rayon is set apart not only in the deep background of the shot, but also by a division in the room. Interestingly though, this shot captures the triangular dynamics of the three main characters: Ron arguing with his
potential, but unattainable, love interest Eve who is slightly out of focus while Rayon lingers in the background. Also note that the only character in complete focus is Ron. This recurring stylistic aspect of DBC’s use of triangularization (and not only a simple hierarchical contrast with Ron) and lens focus will become more pertinent in the following scene we will analyze.

The next shot breaks the established triangle, to include Rayon’s unnamed friend/drug-user/companion/lover, a wooly-headed, lithe boy whose combination of femininity and masculinity lies between Ron and Rayon (see Figure 7). The triangle has become a more balanced square of desire, though briefly. Rayon’s threatening sexual presence is, however,
more overtly felt in one aspect of the mise-en-scene. In the motel room, the walls are decorated with pictures of 1960s and 70s teen idol Marc Bolan, whose music is also featured on the film's soundtrack and can be heard in the background during this scene (see Figure 8). While fixing his piqued gaze on the pictures, it takes Ron a while to notice that some of the pictures are of this androgynous and sexually ambiguous man. Again, the presence of Eve in this shot serves to set up a differentiating hierarchy of femininity. In this case next to pictures of Bolan, whom Rayon loves and identifies with, are some pin-up girls on motorcycles and the “real” woman Eve (her name is of course also not coincidental as the first woman, recalling a Bible-ordained sexual difference). Ambiguous (Bolan) and fantastic (pin-ups) representations of femininity are contrasted with the cisfemininity of properly heterosexual,
though unattached Eve. What is striking is the fact that while Rayon herself is left out of this shot, out of the frame, out of the picture; Bolan becomes the fetishized part of her, the part the film associates to her less than full embodiment of femininity. Filmic bodies are always “fragments, bits of bodies, gestures, desirable traces, fetish points,” Heath (1981, 183) tells us, yet, it is indicative of the film’s hierarchization of femininity which bodies are given more bodily presence and which remain fetish points or traces.

In a brief scene that takes place in a supermarket, the motif of physical unease with a trans character is represented by the use of selective focus. Ron and Rayon are food shopping when they run into Ron’s old drinking buddy TJ. In their initial exchange, TJ looks over Ron’s shoulder and remarks, “those fucking faggots are everywhere.” He is of course referring to Rayon, who is off screen. When Rayon walks into the frame, meaning to shake TJ’s hand, Ron misgenders her by urging TJ to shake “his” hand (“He said hi to you”). Ron wrestles with TJ, who is forced to touch hands with Rayon. In this scene, the three characters do share the same frame in the key moment, when TJ is forced to shake hands with Rayon. This might seem as some sort of (forced) association between them, but this is not the case. Here, the salient use of selective focus uncovers the real issue: the confrontation between two men who have a standoff over the meaning of a trans character (see Figure 9).

The positioning of the characters is telling: Ron and TJ are facing one another, when Rayon enters the frame (and the fray) she forms a triangle, with TJ as the pinnacle blocking a part of the first plane of the frame, and Ron and Rayon on the same right-hand side. TJ is strongly favored in this scene up to this point, since he is always in focus. When he tells Rayon “Fuck you,” the camera’s focus switches to Ron, who grabs TJ and wrestles him into submission. Rayon remains the bystander throughout. When the three characters are all in the same frame, she’s the only one who’s out of focus, signaling the weight of this scene: the heterosexual cisgender men having a fight over the (associated) meaning of a third character who is given no sense of agency, literally blurred out as a subject. Towards the end of the scene, Rayon is granted two reaction shots, which put her in focus for the first and only time in this scene, but they capture her implied clear gratitude for her chivalrous partner. This scene

Figure 9. Confrontation in the supermarket with triangularization.
further underscores Rayon’s need to be saved by Ron due to her failing agency; she is presented as a character in rapid decline.

Rayon’s actual death, her moment of dying, is not shown in the film, but we can analyze two brief scenes that anticipate the empty tragedy of Rayon’s death and its aftermath. In the first scene, which seems unconnected to the rest of the film’s plot, the viewer observes Rayon as she is sitting in front of the mirror. In this intimate moment, she mutters the cryptic line, “God, when I meet you… I hope you’re pretty.” Rather than fulfill a plot function, the scene serves to reinforce the trope of the tragic trans woman seeing herself as a failure, misunderstood in life but hoping she will be recognized in her afterlife. Shortly after, Rayon dies off screen, and the spectator is only allowed access into her grey hospital room through the character of Sunny. Sunny stands in front of the window by an empty bed wearing a dirty grey-white oversized T-shirt, a washed out light permeates the room while he folds Rayon’s leftover clothing, notably a gown (see Figure 10). This fabric is like a shroud for the absent body, signaling its intimacy through proximity to death and her self-identified feminine gender. It also enables the film to bypass any representation of a physical act of dying in which Rayon might assert some agency. There is only that which is left behind, a fragment from her once colorful wardrobe, a filmy fetish point.16

Finally, the absence of Rayon becomes extremely clear in the way the spectator is positioned in one of the final scenes of the film. After Rayon’s death, Eve (who has just been fired from her job at the hospital) comes to visit Ron in the motel office. The previously established pattern between these two characters (Ron trying to impress Eve and possibly strike up a sexual relationship with her) is again played out. Here, the mise-en-scene comments on the triangular relation between Ron, Eve, and the now permanently absent Rayon. Eve walks in and acknowledges the shrine that was installed in Rayon’s memory (see Figure 11). The film’s cinematography then closes the book on the Rayon character: with one pan to the left, Rayon (or her memory even at this point) disappears from the film’s diegesis (see Figure 12). Instead, the end of the shot favors and emphasizes the possible unification of the
heterosexual couple brought together by the shared circumstances of the departed, or rather absented, trans character.

**Demanding more of an enunciation: film’s bodying potential**

It might seem counter-intuitive to ask of film, a notoriously immaterial medium, to “body” forth and enunciate trans figures with a material force. However, we submit that any cinema that involves a trans character has the potential to bring new kinds of bodies into existence. Thus trans cinema studies should not be limited to the framework of enumerating...
stereotypes; however frustrating and dubious they may be, stereotyped characters are part and parcel of how fiction (and even non-fiction) film operates. We propose to shift our scholarly expectations to the horizon of presence: to how a character can be complex, have agency in a film's narrative, and how they arrive and act within the film's mise-en-scene. What kind of bodily and voiced presence does an actor's character achieve? How does a film assemblage a trans body in terms of following a cinematic logic of transsexual embodiment?

This way of perceiving and evaluating cinema does not disparage the ways in which all films have partial bits of bodies, gestures, traces, and fetish points. We should not expect the coherence of a complete or full body—a trans cinema might instead look less like the standardized bodies of cisgender heterosexism, and more like the embrace of a non-normative body, however dispersed. What matters is how those bits are treated and placed into relation in terms of cause and effect, the narrative arc, and degree of agency. Characters are made in the ways the film's system of presence assembles them, including casting and star intertext. So, the evaluative question of a film's political and ideological subtext becomes: in what ways does it rely on presencing trans characterizations via cinematic aspects such as cinematography and mise-en-scene?

In our case *DBC* does in fact disappoint the spectator looking for a new kind of filmic trans body. By recentering white heterosexual masculinity at the point of crisis and heroic redemption in the grand narrative of the HIV epidemic, queers, trans folks, and people of color are removed as agents of change from the story. We have seen how cinematically the film's mise-en-scene and cinematographic aesthetic including focus and framing collude in the narrative of the great white male's resurrection at the cost of the counter-history of trans people and people of color. Further evaluation of popular representations of trans figures should take into consideration how the construction of presence works within the medium's grammar along racialized, gendered, and sexualized lines, and how it establishes hierarchy and agency according to the axes of difference. The point is not that films should accede towards reality, for they can do so much more in terms of assembling new imaginary bodies. Filmic texts like *DBC* that construct and position trans femininity as merely supportive, conflicted and (a)sexual, or not really being there, are hardly worth viewing, for we have seen these disappearing acts before.

**Notes**

1. In our title and first sentence we use the term trans* to indicate the widest possible range of gender identities, expressions, and perceptions possible that are gender variant or gender non-conforming. The * sign attached to trans derives from online communities where an asterisk in a search engine functions as a wildcard for any term with the same prefix. For legibility we will use trans throughout the text, also widely used as shorthand for a range of gender variance: transgender, transsexual, transvestite, genderqueer, and so on.

2. The term cisgender is used throughout the text to refer to a non-transgender person, that is, cis is someone who experiences no or little incongruence between their assigned sex and gender identity (i.e., assigned female and living as a girl/woman). Cis, like trans, coming from Latin meaning “on the side of” whereas trans means “to cross,” hence it refers to gender identities, expressions, and perceptions that stay on the side of one's assigned sex rather than crossing a socio-cultural barrier erected if not maintained by biomedical sciences.

3. We table the question of how trans cinema, working outside mainstream production companies and recognition by major award bodies, differently handles gender transitioning/ed characters and plot, which is addressed by Steinbock (2016).


7. The importance of the opening shot becomes most evident when we look at the film’s very last shot. The final shot mirrors the opening shot: it is, again, a subjective point-of-view shot (of a rodeo rider observed from behind a wooden fence in the arena). In this final shot, the rider is Ron himself and it functions as a wish-fulfillment: he rides the bull one last time. The act of mirroring, or repeating, gives the film a bracketing structure: the narrative is bookended, bracketed by these two subjective shots belonging to the film’s main character. This fantasy underscores and reinforces the dominance of the character’s subjective point-of-view throughout the film.


9. DBC even replaces Rayon’s management of the buyers’ club with a Black lesbian type character (the credits list this character as “Denise,” played by Deneen Tyler) when she fails at her duties due presumably to her drug addiction. The trans mammy appears then as not quite as reliable as the original black mammy.

10. Though Ryan does use this term, borrowed from Lee, Jordy Jones’s article “Gender without Genitals” (2006) on Hedwig and the Angry Inch (2001) was published three years previously and also employed the “magical tranny” in his analysis of the Yitzak character, developed from “magic negro” literature that he applies to the character of Luther Robinson.

11. Rayon’s appearance around minute 30 follows conventions of the timing of the presentation of a key, yet supporting character.


13. It is the voice without body, that is exerts the most power. As Silverman argues, the female voice is always brought back to the body. This embodiment undercuts the potential power disembodiment entails, which is often more accessible to male characters (Silverman 1988, ix).


15. This character is never mentioned by name in the film. The credits list him as “Sunny” (played by Bradford Cox).

16. The gauzy and shimmering sheath is a classical Hollywood marking of the fetishized feminine body, a point famously elaborated by Laura Mulvey’s (1975) readings in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” drawing on Mary Ann Doane’s analysis of Marlene Dietrich in the films of Josef von Sternberg.

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