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DISCOVERY AND LOSS: INTERSECTIONS OF IDENTITY IN *THE BUSINESS OF  
FANCYDANCING* (2002) AND *TRANSAMERICA* (2005)

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## ABSTRACT

This project investigates the meaning of ‘identity’ and ‘home’ in two contemporary films, *The Business of Fancydancing* (2002, dir. Sherman Alexie) and *Transamerica* (2005, dir. Duncan Tucker). Both films would typically be defined as “nontraditional” in the context of American coming-of-age stories, a cinematic genre each nonetheless invokes. These films function as cultural representations of marginalized identities and their trajectories. Seymour, the protagonist of *The Business of Fancydancing*, is a gay/two spirit Native American poet who struggles with maintaining a sense of community identity after leaving the reservation. In *Transamerica*, Bree Osborne, a conservative transsexual woman in the process of transitioning from male to female (formally known as “Stanley”), embarks on a journey with an unexpected travelling companion after learning that she has a delinquent son, who is searching for his “father.” Both films provide fertile ground for an investigation of how these categories of home and belonging, as well as ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation have become much more dynamically nuanced in contemporary society, both in representation as well as in lived experience. This scholarly research seeks to conclude that these films provide a hotbed of themes around modern abilities to travel in America, both literally and figuratively in terms of categories of identity; these depictions elaborate upon and complicate the traditional Western ideas of *bildungsroman*. *The Business of Fancydancing* demonstrates the difficulties of navigation between intersections of identities whereas *Transamerica* depicts how intersections can come together to perform a “whole” identity. Using the medium and genre of road movie film, each elaborates upon theories of identity, complicating the process of identity creation and performance.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Literature develops with the entity that produces it, - the common social need and faculty of expression; and it varies according to *differentiae* of racial, physiographic, and social conditions, and of the inherited or acquired characteristics of which the individual author is constituted. (Gayley 73)

In his 1901 essay, “What is Comparative Literature?” Charles Mills Gayley describes how scholars no longer consider the poet’s work to be influenced by the muses. Instead, Gayley illustrates how literature develops with the “entity” that produces it. The entity could be defined in a number of ways— as a creative subject, as a Great Genius, or simply as an amanuensis. The key to Gayley’s ideas about poetic creation is that this entity develops in tandem with literature, as mutually constitutive historical products. In place of the muses, we focus instead on the creator’s position within his or her society, cultures, and circles of daily interaction. Factors such as historical, geographical, ethnic, and other social conditions influence the perspectives each work contains. Thus, the literary piece is a product of the same historical conditions that produced its creator. On one hand, the representations contained within the work are the imagination of the author, while on the other, they can provide serious reflections of specific “real life” social contexts. In this way, one of literature’s goals is to reflect conflicts between the self and the world.

Over a hundred years after Gayley’s observations, literature still tackles the dilemma of accurate representation, particularly with the contemporary problematic of renegotiating multiculturalism in an age where identities aren’t so easily part and parceled. Gayley’s ideas of author

positionality and created literature can help to identify how authors are searching for a sense of identity beyond the constraints of mosaic identities. Drawing away from politicalized categories of being, the directors of *The Business of Fancydancing* (2002) and *Transamerica* (2005) consciously develop stories that break barriers between truth and fiction, elaborating upon facile formations of identity that resist identification as much as they confirm it. The negotiation of identification between the (multi-faceted) self and various communities in which the self participates is present in both films; however, each responds to statuses of multiplicity differently. Though it is now a common practice to describe identities through multiple states of belonging, each film complicates flattened markers of identity. Given the prolific developments in the epistemology of identity politics— which these films both address and seek to include within their own thinking—these authors complicate popular conceptions of the realities of people with queer identities. Both invoke ideas of travel to illustrate stories that center on journeys of belonging and loss.

Throughout the last one hundred years, the ability to travel has expanded greatly in America, making the “road movie” genre of film a popular one for exploring journeys of change and coming-of-age. The American literary consciousness has always focused on traditional frontier stories so it is of little surprise the stories of modernity are marked by a technologically increasing ability to travel; thus, the road and journey have always been marked in ideas of the American identity (Cohan and Hark 1). However, at the same time, the road movie genre has a long history of “problematizing the uniform identity of the nation’s culture” insofar as the characters are often ones of alienation, rather than conformation (Cohan and Hark 1). Told through ever changing landscapes of American soil, the genre of road film often focuses on the explorations of various tensions and subversions of the historical context in which it was produced (Cohan and Hark 2). Both *The Business of Fancydancing* and *Transamerica*, displace neat national narratives by exploring the ambiguities of the lived experience and self-identification of queer, subaltern characters.

*The Business of Fancydancing* fits the road movie genre in the sense that the protagonist,

Seymour, is still searching for meaning between various categories of identity, physically leaving his home in Seattle to return to his original home on his rural reservation. This film, however, queers the genre in the sense that much of the traveling occurs in the creative center of the character, rather than literally across American landscapes. *Transamerica*, on the other hand, is a road movie in its most traditional form: two characters set off for an adventure together, learning about the past of the other and finding themselves along the way. Almost heavy-handedly, the film documents the actual journey across the country while mirroring the progression and coming-of-age process in each character's identity.

Using both the metaphoric as well as literal road story formats, each film depicts both the convolution of identities themselves as well as the unfolding epistemology of identity politics in contemporary contexts. Not only serving as documentation of marginalized identities (an important task nonetheless), these films desire to rethink and respond to such contemporary elements of contested identities.

However, the projects of each director contrast drastically. Sherman Alexie, a prolific writer and Spokane Indian, explores ideas of travel, identity and home in his film, *The Business of Fancydancing* (2002), focusing on dissidence. The film meditates on the ways in which Alexie's own literature is produced, consumed, and critiqued, in a process Alexie describes as both one of "fancydancing" and "ghost-writing." The film considers the process of the continual adaptation in Alexie's work, and it explores questions of his writing through the lens of autobiographical fiction. Alexie trains his audiences to see the intertext between mediums (poetry and film), between creator (author and poet character), and between the *intersectionalities* of identity, among many other dualities, which he presents in the film. His purpose complicates identity politics by rethinking webs between identities rather than working through each identity separately. The alternative focus illuminates the tensions and explores whether these categories can remain stable in volatile contemporary contexts.

Conversely, Duncan Tucker's film *Transamerica*, demonstrates how the intersections of

identity can work congruently, such as in the case of the protagonist, Bree, whose identification forms a sense of wholeness at the end of her journey. Prior to completing the cross-country road trip, Bree's identities of "transsexual" and "parent" were incongruent aspects, each vying for a dominant position in Bree's lived experience. Through the coming-of-age process, however, Bree is able to reimagine herself, identifying both as a transsexual female and a loving parent.

Focusing heavily on multiple contradictory and complementary identities, both films rely on this concept of intersectionality. First coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, *intersectionality* has come to describe the methodology of studying politicized aspects of a person's identity, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. Theories of intersectionality demonstrate how aspects of one's identity complement, contradict, and become conflated with one another. Often the points of convergence are determined by interlocking systems of oppression. Whether complicated by economic and political systems or ideological formations such as homophobia or racism, the result is an impossible tangle of determinisms. Both Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins deploy the term intersectionality to argue that intersecting oppressions are impossible to untangle within cultural institutions. The original theory proposes a way to understand how systems of oppressions overlap and influence each other. For the purposes of this paper, the term will be used to describe multiple facets of identity and how, on the one hand, they create crises of identity because they conflict, while on the other, they can provide an individual with a sense of wholeness to the extent that they can be considered holistically.

My thesis argues that the films *The Business of Fancydancing* and *Transamerica* consciously and meticulously negotiate conversations based around characters' intersectionality. Rather than trying to resolve or disarticulate the various systems of oppression that underline the formation of subaltern identity, the films instead articulate various failures of such categories of identification when attempting to write a person (or even a nation) within the symbolic order.

For example, Seymour Polatkin is an established poet based in Seattle, portrayed by Evan Adams as a young, gay, Spokane Indian. The plot of the film centers around Seymour's fractured

identity, with the sharp, broken lines between his different marginalized group belongings. When he is in literary spaces, his Indian-ness fades, tailoring his words to white audiences. When he is in Indian spaces, his (mainstream) gayness fades in favor of a “two-spirit” persona. The change is linguistically marked as well, as he falls into the dialect of the reservation. Though Seymour makes the choice to live beyond the “rez” in order to pursue his career, the film’s reservation characters harshly critique his decision. The film plays out the consequences of this choice, as if it is a documentary of the poet’s career. By working in fragmented pieces, Alexie’s film constructs a set of heterogeneous perspectives around Seymour’s fractured identities. Seymour, in turn, negotiates his surroundings intra-diegetically through the construction of various personae, which play up certain characteristics of his identity and downplay others.

At the end of the film, Seymour strips himself of the Indian regalia, which could be read as his refusal to parade around for money as the token Indian poet. He refuses, in other words, the titular “Business of Fancydancing.” A more nuanced reading, however, may include the analysis that he has removed the Indian-ness from his body, fleeing back into the city to wrap his arms around his white lover, Steven. The film suggests that without a sense of connection to his reservation, Seymour will remain in a state of limbo and uneasiness. He is both unsatisfied with his current state of being as well as haunted by a past self defined by living on the rez.

With the shift to the medium of cinema, Sherman Alexie directs a film that focuses on aspects of his own literary work, as his primary career is a writer: mostly short stories and poetry. Alexie creates the imaginary character, Seymour, in order to manipulate the reality represented in the film; the glimpses of Seymour’s intimate spaces help Alexie reflect upon public realities of marginalized identity. In this way, Alexie exerts “total control” of the film by providing diverse contexts in which he is able to create conversations of multiple dualities and paradoxes of auto-reflexive authorship, intertextuality, and identity. In Alexie’s complex creation, he draws attention to what is fluid, “portable,” and emotionally universal, highlighting also what is fractured between multiple contexts.

The production style itself is discontinuous, non-linear, and unconcerned with traditional film aesthetics. It presents itself as a collection of mixed scenes (homemade video, artistic black stage, magical realism-esque scenes, scenes both of extreme closeness and distance). Alexie develops multiple processes of narration to complicate identity politics, focusing on disconnections while searching for identity and home. Additionally, Alexie explores themes of trauma through Seymour's aversion to people and places that remind him of his past. It becomes clear that Alexie's method of identity examination stems from exploration in the environments of critique and praise he has experienced as a writer. In this film, the divisions that play themselves out in the conflicts and criticisms experienced by Seymour are instead integrated, however provisionally.

Alexie's multi-media exploration of divided environments finds its complement in the second film that forms the basis of my study: Duncan Tucker's *Transamerica*. Tucker's project, though equally conscious of the problem of naming identity, radically differs in its desire to depict wholeness rather than fractures. In *Transamerica*, Bree (played by Felicity Huffman) is a middle-aged, transsexual in the process of transitioning into a woman who finds out a week before her surgery that she has a son, Toby (played by Kevin Zegers), from a previous sexual encounter. The plot of this film centers on the two characters' journey across American landscapes, both searching for a sense of independence and selfhood. For much of the film, Bree hides her identity from Toby, both in the sense that she is transsexual as well in the sense that she is his father. The tension and gendered double-entendres provide a balance of humor to the film's overall tone.

By the end of the film, secrets between the two reveal themselves as the two characters work through their personal journeys of identity as well as figure out their relationship with each other. Though the journey presents many crises of identity, the ending solidifies a sense of wholeness and peace the characters find when their various categories of belonging coexist. Paradoxically, *Transamerica* complicates queer intersectionality by being invested in an overall project centered on normalizing, stabilizing, and reaffirming codes of hegemonic society. It is only through Bree's

complete bodily reaffirmation that she is able to rest comfortably with her performativity.

Unlike Alexie's film, whose screenplay comprises a discrete literary work separate from the film, Tucker's film follows his original screenplay closely. Likewise it's style of extreme closeness to the characters and traditional story arch assists the film's vision of normalizing Bree's identity as a transsexual, focusing on integrating the queer into the dominate normative order. The camera and actors intentionally disappear, which allows audiences to connect emotionally with the characters. However, what complicates and makes *Transamerica* so interesting is the double meaning of performativity, precisely because Felicity Huffman (a biological, cisgender woman) is acting as a transsexual woman (a biological man desiring to transition into a woman). On one hand, Huffman's performance demands audiences to *only* see the character, Bree (as opposed to the actor playing Bree), but on the other hand, her performance of masculinity questions biological determinism insofar that it makes the very *performance* of gender overt.

In terms of purpose, *Transamerica* seeks to normalize queer identities, domesticating the spaces in-between each characters' intersectionality in order to depict a sense of overall wholeness. At the same time, we become aware that this integration comprises a proposition: it is part of the performance; the point is not to minimize the problems addressed by intersectionality but to play out the consequences of synthesizing them into an operative, performed unity.

My thesis asserts that *The Business of Fancydancing* and *Transamerica* as films not only document the complexities of overdetermined identity formation addressed by epistemological notions of politicized intersectionality, but they also seek to propose ways to address the tangle of determinisms itself in their documentation of such identity developments. *The Business of Fancydancing* questions the neatness of identity categories by exploring the fractures between different intersections, both in the mental capacity but also in the physical world; it complicates the notion that identities are static, innately fixed phenomenon. *Transamerica*, instead, complicates the notion of biological determinism and fixed identity through its focus on finding happiness and home when intersections of identity come

together. By focusing on the portrayal of a normally silenced queer character, the film seeks to make visible a queer identity that has been tailored to be well received for public audiences. The risk of declaring difference is minimized by the normalizing techniques the film invokes. By examining these two films as cultural artifacts, this thesis will tease out some of the complexities these films present in order to consider how to *do* identity politics differently.

## Chapter 2

### Ghostwriting Materiality

For a living author, Sherman Alexie enjoys much interest from academics. Alexie's directorial debut film, *The Business of Fancydancing*, has already been a focus of numerous Native American literary scholars. Meredith K. James explores Alexie's negation of the position of the author, critic, and audience in her 2005 article, "The Fragmented Reservation of the Mind." Quentin Youngberg, in his article, "Interpenetrations: Re-encoding the Queer Indian..." (2008) seeks to show how the identities of "queer" and "Indian" intersect in the film in coded contexts. He also argues that Alexie expands the "changing contours" of modern Indian cultures. In "Alexie's Nutshell," Blake M. Hausman (2010) likens the character Seymour to Shakespeare's Hamlet. Hausman seeks to compliment Youngberg's assertion by suggesting another "discrete sphere" in which the film functions, providing a compelling argument to the similarities between the two tragic figures. In 2011, Theo. Van Alst published "Sherman Shoots Alexie" which discusses how Alexie has a "semi-autobiographical post-modern grasp" that considers multiple audiences. Jeff Berglund's piece, "The Business of Writing," (2010) focuses on Indian writing as an identity, asserting that Alexie struggles to position himself as an Indian writer and one that lives off the reservation. Simultaneously, then, Berglund asserts, Alexie becomes both an insider and an outsider.

My thesis adds to these conversations by showing how Alexie manipulates the medium of film to provide an environment that explores relationships of intertext and intersectionality through multiple levels of ghostwriting. His self-reflective critique manifests itself most prominently through the critical reception of Seymour as a poet (Van Alst 84). For example, Alexie considers various talking heads and their critical reception of his (Seymour's) work. According to the reviews that appear onscreen:

"Seymour Polatkin's poetry is funny, angry, authentic, and ultimately redemptive." –New York Literature Quarterly May 21, 2001

“Seymour Polatkin is full of shit.” –Indianz.com May 22, 2001

As these reviews indicate, Seymour’s poems charm and excite the normative white critic whereas his Indian audience doesn’t think of him as kindly. Perhaps they loathe him for his haughty demeanor and distance he has towards the reservation. Perhaps the reviewer senses the stories are stolen and calls malarkey. Indeed, Alexie mediates on these accusations of theft within creative practices. The question remains: is Alexie dispelling ghosts by exploring the intertext between his poems, films, and the critiques they invoke? Or does the criticism regarding Seymour’s ghost-making remain intact as they perpetuate a literary violence on the identities they portray? Nonetheless, Alexie’s film creates an experimental space to explore multiple levels of transparency and messy apparitions of representation.

I argue that Alexie’s multifaceted focus forces audiences to read the film as a representation of collective dialogues, exhibiting his reluctance to write native traditionalism in favor of exploring contemporary Indian identities. Indeed, this attempt to create real representations in this film manifests with the critique of Seymour from people on his reservation as well as other critics such as the interviewer character. For example, his geographic location of urban Seattle is harshly critiqued, particularly because many of his stories deal exclusively with reservation life despite the fact that Seymour never returned to the reservation after he went away to college:

THE INTERVIEWER: Okay. Another question. You’ve lived in Seattle for over fifteen years, you’ve traveled the world, really, your books have been published in eighteen countries, you’ve had dinner with the President of the United States, with the Pope, and with Robert Redford, and yet, 95% of your poems, by my count, deal exclusively with your reservation. Why is that? (Alexie, *The Business of Fancydancing* 2002)

Why is that? In response to the paradox introduced by the interviewer, Seymour Polatkin remains silent (one of the few depictions of him as the “Stoic Indian”); he refuses to give the African American

interviewer an answer. Questions about the subject content of Seymour's poetry and his allegiances to his Indian reservation are more personal than he wants admit to himself, much less admit to the bullying inquires from an investigative interviewer. Viewers of the film are offered conflicting answers, yet the reasons why his poems are almost exclusively about Native Americans become central to the themes of the film. It is only by leaving the reservation that Seymour is able to become a successful writer, and only by crafting stories that center on quasi-mystical representations of his long-lost reservation. Such stories interest white audiences, giving him great acclaim, but they also consume Seymour himself as he insists that he cannot write about anything else, no matter how he tries.

Sherman Alexie himself has had to negotiate similar accusations of theft<sup>1</sup> throughout his literary career. *The Business of Fancydancing* at once rehearses this critical reception— Seymour is, of course, a stand-in for Sherman. But Alexie's approach is committed less to articulating a brilliant retort to critics who might question his native commitment, than to disarticulating the assumptions that underlie such claims to authorial responsibility. Throughout the film, Alexie toys with the very question of authorship itself, and there is a sense of irony to Seymour's performances of Alexie's own poetry. For example, Alexie's tongue-in-cheek poem, "How to Write the Great American Indian Novel" transforms into a completely different poem with Seymour's striking performance in front of his white audience. He utters the ending of the poem: "In the Great American Indian novel, when it is finally written, all of the white people will be Indians, and all of the Indians will be ghosts." What is most ironic is that Seymour could be the one to pen "The Great American Indian novel" since he has perfected the art of writing moving poetry for white audiences. However, he is largely unwilling to admit how his own stories and poetry turn American Indians into "ghosts" (Hausman 91).

Quite literally, Seymour steals stories which produces ghosts of the Indians whose stories he has stripped; they have no agency in the process as he simply takes without giving any sort of

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<sup>1</sup> See Egan's "An Indian Without Reservations" for details.

recognition that the poetry's content is not wholly his own. For example, his best friends on the reservation, Aristotle and Mouse, are insulted by his poetry. Mouse comments in one scene that "It's like I'm already dead," after reading Seymour's prose about his uranium-poisoned kittens. In the story, they are Seymour's kittens, thus Mouse is effectively erased from the retelling. In his article "Alexie's Nutshell," Blake Hausman muses, "...did Seymour imagine that Mouse was dead in order to write about him and steal his stories? After ten years of separation, are Seymour's childhood acquaintances from the reservation effectively 'dead' to him?" (91). From his friends' point of view, Seymour's crime is a personal one: he has stolen those stories, often pushing "real" Indians in them out, replacing them with himself. "He took my life, man," Mouse confides to Aristotle.

As Mouse is also an artist - he plays the violin - his critique harshens, as he does not sell his art, but rather shares it with everyone, including his white girlfriend whom he antagonistically calls *suyapi* (a derogatory term for white person as defined in film). However, from Seymour's point of view, he is memorializing friends into his prose, making them special and making them sell. He feels like he has insights that no one else can have, or as he narcissistically tells the interviewer, "Nothing is real until I think it."

The intertext of film is particularly strong in the instance of the popular poem "How to Write the Great American Indian Novel." Originally written early in Alexie's career as part of *The Summer of Black Widows* (1996) collection, the poem appears satirical; Alexie pokes fun at the stereotypical portrayals of Native Americans in U.S. fiction and film. The original provides a laundry list of stereotypes such as the natural beauty of Indian women, the savagery of Indian men and general ideas that all Indians are from horse cultures and possess mystical powers. Alexie also deals with the fascination of exotic skin colors (a reciprocal relationship). However, due to existing power structures, Alexie's poem ends with a derisive lament, "In the Great American Indian novel, when it is finally written, all of the white people will be Indians and all of the Indians will be ghosts" (95).

In the film, Seymour's rendition is sardonically *tragic*, containing all the "tragic features" described in the beginning of the poem. Of course, there still remains an element of irony in the film: Seymour's creation of the tragic poem only highlights his own ghostwriting, because after all, a white literary audience expects some tragedy from the Great American Indian poet. Seymour performs the white ideal so well, the question remains that with the Great American Indian novel, if he has indeed written it, whether it has rendered him white despite his 100% Spokane Indian bloodline. Thus, Alexie's own ghostwriting is doubled, as the comic original transforms into Seymour's own piece. It is Evan Adam's performance, however, that renders the poem tragic; while the character is Alexie's invention, Seymour's *being* only comes to be through Adam's performance.

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Throughout the film, the interviewer asks Seymour numerous invasive questions about his feelings as an author and as an Indian. Interestingly enough, she does not interrogate him on his queerness. Indeed, as Youngberg writes, the film in general "does not make sexuality a foregrounded issue" (73). Rather, she draws another angle on Seymour's authorship, providing a voice of critical race issues. She purposefully asks uncomfortable questions surrounding his authorship and connections to the reservation to tease out the hypocrisy of Seymour's identity. The two play a cat-and-mouse game, sitting in opposing seats: each "scene" never lasts long but as they are inter-spliced throughout the film, suggesting that these are questions Seymour must deal with frequently in the literary world.

Each scene adds to the subtle conversation(s) Alexie has created on the role of an ethnic author. For example, when the interviewer asks him why he left the reservation, Seymour smoothly replies that he "had questions about the world [his] hometown could never answer." When prodded further, he says that the "rez is equal parts magic and loss" in his typical evasive style. However, "equal parts magic and loss" becomes a sentiment closest to the truth, for reasons explained later. For now, it's sufficient to point out that his writing focuses on the Native American experience, even though the latter is a fantasy

world he has created by mixing Native stories with heavy imagery designed to hook a white audience. While economically successful, Seymour's ghost-writing fractures the intersectionality of his own Indian identity; he is only linked to it by painful reminders of past Indian experiences as well as his own attempt to articulate dis-integrated figures (ghosts).

The interviewer, however, doesn't let his evasive tactics steer the conversation. As an ethnic investigator, she "calls him out" on his status as a Native American author and on its gross juxtaposition with his concerns for others of his racial/ethnic identity. She critiques Seymour in a way the white majority could not, given the long winded discussion about the history of Native oppression or as Seymour calls it, "colonization and the missionary position."

This observation of racial critique is not one seeking to collapse borders between "black" and "red": each has a history of imperialism and racism, which are different in many nuanced ways. However, both groups of minorities share a similar relationship with white hegemonic standards. Questions around an individual author's obligation to his or her people are common, both on the grounds of representation and wealth. Pressures to create insightful and honest depictions are high. As Jeff Berglund eloquently writes in his article, "The Business of Writing,"

All writers- it goes without saying- struggle with the burden of history, but American writers of color whose histories and cultures have been previously ignored or misrepresented by mainstream culture have an even greater burden of expectation placed upon them- by members of their own communities as well as progressives from outside. Layered on top of that- for the Indigenous writer- are the beautiful complex traditions, versions of history, spirituality, cosmology, and philosophies that any tribally affiliated writer must choose whether to explore in his publications. (244)

Such is the situation that both Alexie and Seymour find themselves navigating. Indeed, *The Business of*

*Fancydancing* converses with viewers, seeking to engage audiences on the politics of authorship, criticism, and the consumerism of such cultural items. Alexie himself is no stranger to criticism: many have noted the controversies about his work surrounding his (mis)representation of tribal stereotypes, such as alcoholism. (e.g. Berglund, Hausman, Van Alst). In this way, Alexie's film as a project veers away from fancydancing (performing for wealth/acclaim) in favor of creating critical engagement with reading and viewing practices; he thus, ghostwrites in order to unsettle epistemological frameworks of intertexts and intersectionality. The ghost-writing becomes a constant negotiation between artificial representations and destabilizing subjectivity.

Real authors must also navigate interpersonal relationships strained from their career decision. In a 1998 New York Times article, Timothy Egan reports that some in Alexie's hometown are hurt by his stories. Mikki Samuels, a college librarian, told Egan, "He's very controversial here. What people on the reservation feel is that he's making fun of them. It's supposed to be fiction, but we all know whom he's writing about. He has wounded a lot of people. And a lot of people feel he should try to write something positive." A similar viewpoint is strongly depicted in the film with Aristotle's character. Aristotle feels like Seymour abandoned him for a literary career in which Seymour sells himself and other Indians out.

As I suggest above, the film acts as Alexie's response to such a tense social position. In many ways, *The Business of Fancydancing* is a meditation on how Native American authors who leave the reservation to practice their craft must tread carefully between worlds. Berglund confirms:

Alexie's work on authorship exposes us to the tensions that emerge when American Indian writers allied with tribal groups are thought to represent or misrepresent the community. This dynamic thought, takes us back to the point I've been making: tribal communities are composed of diverse perspectives, so the challenge of the individual to represent the whole, the collective, is unachievable.

(259)

While still appealing to literary audiences, an indigenous writer must also examine how their writing affects their community. Alexie seeks to engage us in conversation regarding the representations or misrepresentations in his literature. The film captivates itself on the multiple conversations created between texts and media—the intertexts between stories, poems, screenplay, and film— as well as between Alexie’s own work and that of the lead actor, Evan Adams (Seymour), in interpreting his work. Alexie utilizes a multi-medium platform (film) to explore what is “portable” between both authors and texts as well as what is “portable” in terms of identity when one leaves home.

This film invites the viewer to consider the stereotypical characters such as the “Stoic Indian” (Aristotle), the “Wise Woman” (Agnes), and “The Public Relations Indian” (Seymour), while creating characters that are also vividly complex. Alexie is playing with stereotype, using it to critique itself as well as attempting to unpack the truths behind these problematic constructs. In his article, “Interpenetrations,” Youngberg articulates how Alexie wants to “unfix” such rigid representations. He writes:

He [Alexie] sees promise, in fact, in a new generation of writers who are turning away from these more traditional representations and are beginning to write against the expectations of the reading public in an attempt to represent the full, fluid, and complex realities of their own experiences as American Indians. (55)

Indeed, Alexie skillfully nuances such stock characters in order to give voice to multiple identities but also to suggest he is only one author and expectations requiring one author to speak for all 317 federally recognized First Nation communities are unreasonable.

Jeff Burglund confirms: “Alexie’s works hold a mirror up to us, asking us why we need what we think we need and why we expect an author, this author, to deliver it” (260). Alexie, too, holds up a mirror to *himself*, constantly tweaking his craft to better exhibit the nuances of writing stories for

contemporary depictions. *The Business of Fancydancing*, in particular, seeks to open conversations surrounding the production and consumption of cultural texts but ultimately lets the viewer decide the extent of the engagement. Alexie's project invites audiences to also complicate their understanding, recognizing intersections and multiple viewpoints. After all, an audience's position, Youngberg argues, depends on their intersections of identity and their ability to de-code the messages in the film. Thus, Youngberg effectively argues that everyone sees a different film. For example, some members pick up on the coded sexuality while other understand the coded forms in place for a Native audience.

Youngberg asserts:

Alexie's mediation of audience access through encoded meanings has a double-edged effect. At the same time that his interpenetrating codes represent a method for queering the Native sphere, they also enact a process of "Indianing" the white and queer spheres. Moreover, the interpenetration between these categories is important to his overall project of breaking out of traditional practices of reading and writing the Indian. By infusing his stories with both Indian and queer codes, he is able to mediate between still treating the important political and cultural themes that affect Indian lives while resisting idealistic, romantic, and essentialist readings that would fail to acknowledge the full and fluid complexity of Indians' lives and experiences (Youngberg 64).

In the passage above, Youngberg articulates how Alexie accomplishes multiple dualities in both the contents of identity depicted as well as in his political practices as a writer. His attempt at portraying the complexity of Indian's lives and experiences succeeds, only with the insistence that Alexie/Seymour cannot graciously accept the position of the token Indian author. Ironically, the film succeeds only by negotiating that tokenism: Seymour uses his status as an Indian writer (his token) for personal gain, at the expense of other Indians. Van Alst confirms, stating:

As America looks for shorthand ways to communicate with its indigenous

neighbors, and would (to be kind) lazily prefer a singular and accessible spokesperson, Alexie powerfully declines this dubious award and pushes back against this misguided designation, saying in effect to America that there is no *one*, no singular person who could speak for us all. We are as varied and unique and complex as you are. The film speaks in many voices, and so do we. (91)

Accordingly, Alexie insists that one author's work, while multifarious in nature, can serve as only a sliver of representation for any population, even a text as complex as this one. Certainly, Alexie is conscious of other Indian's thoughts about his writing, but he also considers, too, how alienating it is to leave the tribe to become a "lone" writer. He recognizes the difficulties around keeping an Indian identity based off of a community on the reservation. Indeed, it is difficult when the author moves away from the rez. The physical connection between community and author is intrinsically removed with the relocation. Additionally, the change in economic status and lifestyle creates dramatic differences in lived experiences. An Indian in such a position must consider what they can carry with them and what they must leave behind.

Mouse's death forces Seymour to confront the past he had lost and what has changed as a result of his neglect. Mouse's death was an indirect result of Seymour's stolen stories, and his abandonment may have contributed greatly to Mouse's suicidal, self-deprecating habits. Aristotle, too, expresses hurt, further exasperated by the best friend ("we were brothers") bond he shared with Seymour. Agnes' hurt quietly waits for Seymour's presence, wishing for a sexual reconciliation; however, she is less judgmental than the others and is proud of Seymour's accomplishments. Nonetheless, all of them are hurt as a result of his actions and decision to quit the reservation.

To identify as both a writer and Native American necessitates a certain amount of rearranging those identities that can be at the same time complementary (stories are valued in most Native American tribes) and contradictory (an author requires a certain amount of individualism where

community is emphasized in most Native tribes). Physically leaving the tribe puts a strain on relationships and it is of little surprise that Seymour gets snubbed when he turns up in his nice city car and expensive clothing. These symbols mark him as an *outsider*, but his history on the reservation simultaneously makes him an *insider*. Seymour's identity contradicts: on one hand, his trip home forces him to face his past community of belonging, and on the other, he is reminded that the Spokane Indian reservation *was* "home of Seymour Polatkin," but as someone (presumably Aristotle) has written on the boundary sign, it is "not anymore."

Before Seymour pulls up to the main house, he puts on a cryptic mask, understanding himself as the outsider/other. As a writer, he has already been accustomed the position of the outsider/other, for it is the very exoticism of his Indian identity which earns him fame and wealth. However, by no longer living on the rez or keeping close contact with its inhabitants, Seymour no longer carries much of that identity back with him. It is only on the "rez" that Seymour can tap into it. His diction changes, particularly when he is at ease with Agnes; for example, he says *ennit* in the same breath that he attempts to deny the reservation's impact on him. Agnes reminds him that it was his ambition that made the rez a prison, but Seymour twists his reality and memories to make it appear as if he has been the one abandoned by his childhood friends. During one of their fights, he overtly accuses Aristotle of leaving him at the university. In his poetry, he reiterates the idea that he has been abandoned:

O Mouse, O, Aristotle,  
 The men I loved  
 Before I loved men!  
 O, salmon boys,  
 O, Jesus fish,  
 O, divergent rivers,  
 Return to me, return to me.

In the poem, the friends must return to him as if they are the ones that left. In reality, Seymour is thrown out of his imagined world and forced to ask critical questions about himself and the decisions he has made that have hurt others. He must confront how his lived experience has diverted from what he remembers and creates. Agnes, Aristotle, and others refuse to let Seymour live comfortably in his illusions, evading both responsibilities as well as consequences.

The people on the reservation are not the only ones who notice Seymour's evasive personae. In the following passage, the interviewer points out Seymour's inconsistency between his success and his charity. She suggests he has engaged in literary abuse of his people as well, given that by her count, 95% of his stories are about the reservation:

THE INTERVIEWER: I've got some magical figures here. The average income among reservation Indians is less than \$10,000 a year. The average life span of a reservation Indian man is 49 years. The number one cause of death for reservation Indian men is suicide. And nearly 60% of reservation Indian men are alcoholics.

SEYMOUR: What's that have to do with me?

THE INTERVIEWER: How much money did you make last year?

SEYMOUR: I don't think that's any of your business.

THE INTERVIEWER: Well, I did a little research and discovered that your lecture fee is \$10,000 a shot. That's very impressive.

(Alexie 22)

As the interviewer remarks, \$10,000 per lecture is a considerable sum. It is not without irony that his lecture fee is the same amount that many Indians on the reservation statistically make a year. Jace Weaver in his book, *That the People Might Live* (1997), confirms these bleak statistics. He writes:

The average yearly income is half the poverty level, and over half of all Natives are unemployed. On some reservations, unemployment runs as high as 85-90

percent. Health statistics chronically rank Natives at or near the bottom. Male life expectancy is forty-four years, and female is forty-seven... The worst part is that these statistics have not changed in thirty years. Substance abuse, suicide, crime, and violence are major problems among both urban and reservation populations.

(11)

With large social problems like alcoholism and suicide rampant among Native American cultures, the interviewer insinuates that Seymour has financially turned his back on his people, a marginalized population, who have (historically and contemporarily) had serious need for programs targeting such social issues. Thus, their basic needs have been silenced, as is common in communities of extreme poverty. The interviewer judges him for making so much without giving back to the people he uses in his stories. The question remains, however, whether a white author would be as harshly critiqued on issues of community and personal wealth. Nonetheless, Alexie creates an environment of uncomfortability that persists beyond her interrogations, pulling in real world statistics to illuminate such positions.

Similarly, Theo Van Alst in his article, "Sherman Shoots Alexie," likens Seymour Polatkin to the character Kane in the film *Citizen Kane* (1941). Van Alst writes that Seymour, "becomes an indigenous Kane/Cain, only able to achieve the American Dream by "selling out" his people. His riches seemingly come from the exploitation of his own people, his appropriation of their stories, which are a resource" (80). By manipulating stories he has heard and seen on the reservation, Seymour has been able to make a fortune without giving anything back to the people that supported him when he was young. Van Alst writes, "...Seymour's (read Alexie's) recognition that his stories written from his Urban perch of privilege are not merely his own. They belong also to those he has left behind on the reservation" (85). It is of little surprise then, that his friends are upset with Seymour's literary abuse and abandonment on an interpersonal level. They feel his departure in very concrete ways; *physically*, he is

no longer present. Physically, he cannot transport those people into his world, and thus, he loses (by his choice) his original “home.” Yet, he cannot fully create a new one, as some of his closest relationships remain on the reservation. Instead, he seeks comfort with Steven, his white boyfriend, though their very difference constitutes their union. Sensing Seymour’s distant longing, Steven whines, “I’m your tribe now,” attempting to force an Indian construction on their relationship without realizing the idea of tribe is what Seymour has decidedly left behind.

The interviewer points to Seymour’s tribal abandonment by enforcing the idea that the personal is always political. She views his failure to help support his community as grievous, given his notoriety and wealth. In these ways, she critiques his (arguably difficult) position as the token-spokesperson, judging his use of such privilege harshly.

Indeed, wealth separates Seymour from his community on the reservation. After learning about Mouse’s death, he does a book reading of Alexie’s poem “Giving Blood” which starts with the line, “I need money for the taxi cab ride home to the reservation.” Grossly juxtaposed, the next scene shows Seymour’s expensive car leaving the city, exemplifying the disconnection between Seymour and the Indians about whom he writes. Thus, Alexie effectively dismantles his own position as a writer, becoming, we might say, another kind of ghost. “Giving Blood,” after all, is originally his poem, and he uses it to put such critiques against himself into the conversations of the film.

### Chapter 3

#### Equal Parts Magic and Loss

By returning home, Seymour must reconcile with things he has lost with moving away from the reservation in order to pursue a career. He describes the reservation as comprising of “equal parts magic and loss” but the phrase contains a double meaning as his life in Seattle is likewise very much one of magic (success, fame) and loss (lack of community, belonging). Seymour’s decisions have offered no stability; he simultaneously wants to be the token Indian while denying himself and his Native American community a sense of connectedness, and thus loses the relationship he tries to create with his poems. This chapter will explore the tragic and affective manifestations of Seymour’s character through an analysis of how his ghostwriting becomes actualized. By dealing almost exclusively with reservation motifs, Seymour is able to dismantle his experiences in his creative work, but fails to untangle himself from his visceral connection to the reservation.

In effect, Seymour is unable to make complete peace with the reservation. Instead, he lives vicariously through his stories, his made-up reality, not considering the real-world obligations to his tribe. Seymour attempts to become a “tribe,” so to speak, through his stories, without realizing that a tribe cannot consist of a single person. He questions his obligation to assist his community financially or otherwise. The confrontation of such tensions swell when Aristotle leaves college, and they finally burst ten years later in a scene where Seymour and Aristotle fight on the porch after Seymour returns for the first time to attend Mouse’s wake.

Though the childhood friends started at St. Jerome University together, Aristotle didn’t feel like he fit well into the university environment. His grades drop, and the dreams of becoming a pediatrician are washed away with cheap liquor. He drunkenly burst into a café, begging Seymour to come back to the “rez” with him. When Seymour refuses Aristotle yells, “You like it out here, don’t you? Playing

Indian, putting on your feather and beads for the white folks? Out here, you're the Public Relations warrior, you're Super Indian, you're the expert and authority. But back home, man, you're just that tiny little Indian who cries too much."

Aristotle is insightful about Seymour's desire for white attention and the power that goes along with being the "Public Relations warrior." Alexie himself has felt the heat of such critique. Aristotle is less sympathetic, however, to Seymour's mixed emotional history with the reservation. Seymour tells him that he is too smart to stay on the reservation, echoing almost word for word what the testing official told him when he scored (too) well (for an Indian). Aristotle's sense of reservation loyalty remains strong, and he personally feels snubbed by Seymour's desire to "dance white." They exchange threats of fighting the next time they see each other, but the violence never passes.

Instead, when they confront each other on the porch, a heated argument ensues. "Let's dance," says a woman, getting in between Seymour and Aristotle, invoking a different association with what a dance entails. This dance levels the field, and both partners unpack the sentiments they have been saving for each other. Accusations and revelations are exchanged between the two, becoming verbally entangled. Aristotle forces Seymour to acknowledge how much these Indian people have helped him, refusing to let Seymour keep thinking that he did it all on his own. Likewise, Seymour forces Aristotle to recognize that some of the stories are about him because he knows and loves him so much.

Since Seymour lives now so fully in a sphere of white queer normativity in Seattle, his stories are his only connection to the reservation. He holds on to them, but his poems are only ghosts of the things he wishes he could still hold close. In contrast, Aristotle couldn't carry his Indian identity in the white elitist environment at the university and thus, returns home. Aristotle's choice is juxtaposed with Seymour's willingness to give up the non-portable parts of Indian identity to reap the benefits of being novel, but this choice leaves a hole in the whole of both their identities.

The history of these two characters reaches a depth that could not be contained in their angry words. After Aristotle leaves college, Seymour completely distances himself from the reservation, diving

instead into his studies and his role as the “Affirmative Action Indian.” In college, he becomes friends with Agnes, who, while not originally a member of his reservation, goes to Spokane after graduation. Mouse comments to her that she’s doing it backwards: “most smart Indians move away from the rez.” She tells him that she’s starting a new trend. With the character of Agnes, Alexie doesn’t want to imply that the only way for smart Indians to succeed is by choosing between the rez and the outside world. Instead, Agnes uses her education as a teacher to positively transform a reservation with which she never before had a personal connection. Her deceased father was Spokane Indian, and by returning, she fills the absence she felt from his passing. Ironically, the loss of her first love (Seymour) remains, as the two switch locations.

With no other Indians around, Seymour makes a life in the city, frequenting gay nightclubs. In two separate instances, he sees visions, one of Aristotle and one of Mouse, dancing in the club; their presence is incongruous, appearing ghostlike in the world that Seymour now calls home. Seymour also attends Alcoholic Anonymous meetings, where he first practices his craft on a “captive” audience, using his poetry as a means to sobriety. (Alexie himself has accredited his own sobriety to writing.) “Alcohol is a drum that calls me, sometimes it’s hard not to dance,” Seymour says. He won’t “fancydance” for alcohol like Aristotle does; the alcoholic Indian is one stereotype he will not embody. Instead, writing pushes him away from a dependence on alcohol. His method of “getting clean” is juxtaposed by Mouse’s homemade video, “How to make a Bathroom Cleaner Sandwich.” By choosing to “dance white,” instead of listening to the calling drum of alcohol, Seymour effectively avoids substance addiction as well as the traumas of alcoholism he had experienced as a child on the reservation.

Seymour’s trauma is only fully explained towards the end of the film when the investigator’s probing questions eventually break down his cool demeanor. Audiences learn that the ring he wears constantly around his neck is his lone reminder of his sister, whom had been accidentally shot and killed by a neighborhood boy. Additionally, through a conversation with Agnes, audiences learn that Seymour’s mother committed suicide off a bridge after his sister’s death. We also learn that his mother encouraged

him to pursue an education, effectively creating the potential to leave behind the pain of the reservation.

The only memories we see of Seymour's father are ones with him reeking of booze and his children stuck in the car until last call. The poem about children's fathers that Steven recites back to Seymour becomes a meta-reflection on Alexie's own father and the universalities of dysfunctional fatherhood that many can share. Steven says, "...if you can forgive/perhaps I can forgive my father," and Seymour interrupts by finishing the last line of the poem, "Because fathers sin/children must forgive." In this moment, Steven appears vulnerable, telling the story about how he hasn't seen his father in "15 years, 3 months, and 12 days to be exact." Alexie's cameo character in the film says a similar statement when asked how long since he's last seen Seymour, drawing universal lines of dialogue between characters and the representations of real people. The failings of both Steven and Seymour, however, are not in their recognition but in their follow-through. Even after making the phone call, Steven cannot bear to talk to his father, letting the line go dead. And even with his musing of the reservation, Seymour finds it difficult to confront the things that haunt him.

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After Seymour publishes his first book, the transformation into a token Indian writer is complete. He no longer dances as an alcoholic Indian, but rather performs as a commoditized object of an Indian author. Hausman writes, "Seymour's own pockets are thus filled with the spoils of "dancing white," and the film's viewers are given direct reflections of who Seymour has pleased in order to become, as he puts it, "the Affirmative Action poet" (84). Symbolically, the film confirms that Seymour "dances white" as many scenes of the book reading are inter-spliced with artistic scenes of a regalia-clad Seymour fancydancing. Though Seymour as an authorial voice is able to dismantle his attachment to the reservation, these scenes suggest his affective attachment to his traditional roots cannot be so easily dismantled. In those darkened scenes, he fancydances, embodying both his Indian and two-spirit identities.

In her article, "The Res Has Missed You," Meredith K. James asserts that Seymour is "the one

who *fetishizes* his own definitions of “Indian-ness” and his own identity as a Native person. He is the one who simultaneously criticizes non-Natives’ erroneous perceptions of American Indians, and exploits these perceptions to his advantage (243). Seymour knows that there are several levels of exploitation occurring. He is aware of his commodification of “Indian-ness” in his stories (i.e. he’s featured as the Indian author for National Indian Month) as much as he is aware of himself as an object to be commoditized. For example during a book signing, Seymour appears somewhat peeved when a white (presumably gay) man touches his hair (as white women have done with Alexie), which effectively positions the author as an object to be touched.

A suspension of access to one’s own body may be required if one’s identity is to travel the interior lands of the literary world, particularly if the person fulfills the role of the exotic Other. For some audience members, it isn’t enough to get a book signed. Physical boundaries usually respected between strangers disappear when the author’s (private) body becomes objectified. Though the written objects are already presumed to be part of the commodification, Alexie clearly suggests that there is an element where the author himself is made into a commodified object. Berglund confirms that Seymour’s performances “remind us that consumers are interested in buying certain kinds of Indians” (248). However, for Seymour, any negative attention on his person is worth the benefits. In addition to financial gains, Seymour enjoys picking up men at his poetry readings and receiving their (sometimes sexually graphic) fan mail. He wraps himself in layers of elaborate lies, his armor to protect himself: a different lie for each autograph-seeking person and occasionally, also a slipped piece of paper containing his hotel room number. Although Seymour realizes that he is selling out, he doesn’t care because he enjoys the attention that he receives. On the reservation, he was just the “little Indian that cries too much,” but by shamelessly fancydancing, Seymour taps into the joys that fame and wealth bring, such as trendy material goods and considerable recognition of his talents. Berglund writes,

*The Business of Fancydancing* meditates on the politics of creativity: a writer’s complex personal dance between personal and communal memory, between tribal

tradition and history, and between private profit, artistic acclaim, and responsibilities to home. (246)

It is not until Seymour is forced to recognize his Indian community that he feels the repercussion of his choices. After all, his “armor of lies” is ineffective against the people who know him most intimately. They force him to see the harm he has caused. It is not until then that he fully realizes he has made up his reality. Beyond politics of creativity, the film concentrates on the entanglement of affective motivations upon which his creative process is constituted. Seymour’s stories are the only thing in his “identity backpack” that grounds him to his Indian-ness, but they are only “ghosts,” fractured memories of the people and places he once knew so well.

Seymour not only uses his literary career to distance himself from the reservation, but also his identity as a gay man. He attempts to keep his gay and Indian identities and interactions separate. For example, he refuses to take Steven with him to Mouse’s wake, telling him, “You’re the opposite of rez.” Likewise, one of his quotes appears on screen that reads:

I’ve had sex with one Indian woman,  
 112 white boys, sixteen black men,  
 seven Asian men, three dudes of  
 ambiguous ethnic identity, one really  
 homely guy, and zero Native American men.

Effectively then, audiences understand Seymour’s self-professed sexual past. We can also see paradoxes: while Seymour’s sexual conquests have mostly been concerned with white men, interestingly enough, he refers to them as “boys”. The construction insinuates unforeseen sexual power dynamics as well as an exotification of white skin. Likewise, one could extrapolate that Seymour uses his own exotification of Indian-ness for his sexual benefits as much as he uses it for his economic ones. Throughout the movie, one can decode the subtleties of racialized sexual tensions, particularly the bedroom scene where the two lovers, Seymour and Steven, argue over answering the phone and how Indians are the only people that

call each other at three in the morning; Steven says, “Funny how that works, isn’t it: you being a racist jerk and yet still finding the need to get me naked?” Thus, Alexie confirms suspicions that one’s social positions determine the types of racism, even within the binary of the characters’ relationship. Alexie also invokes racial tensions humorously with allusions to Seymour’s desire for Custer. Youngberg writes,

The reference to Custer is repeated at various moments in the film, but in this particular scene it serves as a poignant reminder of the doubly transgressive nature of Seymour’s relationship with Steven. As a white male, Steven is both lover and enemy to Seymour. This love-hate tension in their interactions accentuates the difficulty of such relationships and the manner in which social and political conflicts are almost always inherent in relationships of desire. (67)

Likewise, Steven and Seymour’s relationship is predicated on the eroticification of their differences, further complicated by the sexual roles each chooses. Thus, their relationship exists in an uneasy paradox, and audiences aren’t fooled when we hear Steven say, “I’m your tribe now.” As a white man, one whom did not know Seymour’s ethnicity when they first met, he couldn’t possibly create something as complex as a “tribe,” with or without the support of Seymour.

Though Seymour refuses to bring his white lover to the reservation, this action should not be read as Alexie positioning the reservation as a homophobic space. Indeed, Seymour’s queerness isn’t a point of contention with the reservation characters, even the older generations. For example, he tells a crowd about his grandmother figuring out that she had a gay rooster and her solution of eating it: “That was my grandmother’s way of saying a chicken was a chicken and that it didn’t matter to her that I was gay or not,” Seymour says. He tells another story of coming out to his grandmother, also equally positive and humorous, about how she asked him what he likes to do in bed with a man. His descriptions fill his audiences with “feel good” feelings and they beam at his anecdote. Although the film audiences have an awareness of Seymour’s multiple half-true stories, he gives every inclination that he was loved and supported on the reservation. Likewise, Agnes offers him full support for his sexuality choices, despite

how Seymour's sexual desire for only men displaces her own desire for him.

Though people on the reservation do not appear to care that he is gay, Seymour *himself* has many internal issues that keep him from wanting to stay at the reservation. Even Estrada, who ultimately determines Alexie's constructions to be problematic, writes, "Aristotle spits on Seymour for leaving the reservation and assimilating into white culture, not for being gay" (115). Aristotle's anger has nothing to do with Seymour's queerness; his sexuality does not threaten Aristotle. They even kiss at one point in the film, during a bonding moment where Aristotle overlays the words to a poem that Seymour is constructing with his own Indian chant, assisting in a shared creation which both can relate. The scene ends with Aristotle quickly kissing Seymour full on the lips before leaving the room.

In the article "Visible Sexualities or Invisible Nations," Lisa Tatonetti criticizes her students for not reading this relationship as queer. She asserts that because of the shared kiss and Seymour's inquiry of Agnes (who is now dating Aristotle) - "Is he still thunder beneath the sheets?" means that Ari and Seymour were once sexually 'gay' together (173). Though one can see a glimmer of envy in Seymour's eyes (as opposed to jealousy: he has already lost Aristotle) when Agnes tells him about her quasi-relationship with him, I question Tatonetti's reading on several accounts. First, if Aristotle means so much to him, why would he not include him in the recount of sexual partners? If Seymour and Aristotle *were* intimate on a sexual level, it is unlikely he would have denied sleeping with any Native American men. Perhaps one of the reasons *why* Seymour doesn't sleep with Indian men is *because* of his complicated relationship with Aristotle. Furthermore, Alexie explains his thought process behind the two characters:

I love this, two brown boys in bed together. And I was always curious myself...when I think about my relationships with people...straight and gay...  
When you love somebody... your friend... there is always some aspect of attraction there... along the spectrum somewhere I think... I was curious about when two men are this close, two friends, childhood friends, and one is gay and one is

straight... how much sexual attraction is in the relationship? (qtd in Estrada 114).

Thus, Alexie himself asserts the straight identity of Aristotle. Rather than a homosexual relationship, it is their homosocial bond and long history that makes them so close, which of course, is further complicated by Seymour's identification as two-spirit. The spectrum that Alexie speaks about refers, at least in part, to Adrienne Rich's (not entirely unproblematic) conception of an erotic continuum in her article, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence." She writes,

"The denial of reality and visibility to women's passion for women, women's choice of women as allies, life companions, and community, the forcing of such relationships into dissimulation and their disintegration under intense pressure have meant an incalculable loss to the power of all women *to change the social relations of the sexes, to liberate ourselves and each other.*" (63 emphasis in original)

Though Rich discusses compulsory heterosexuality in lesbian terms, a similar argument can be made for queer men. Aristotle and Seymour absolutely exist on such a continuum and to read their relationship *only* as gay conforms to heteronormative white standards of sexuality. In a sense, Tatonetti is ignoring the visibility of such an erotic relationship between two *really good male friends* (not gay lovers) to exist. She ignores the continuum in which we all exist with people to whom we are close, both male and female as well as ambiguities of two-spirit and other transgender identities. Regardless of whether or not the connection is sexual, characters/people have the potential to form constellations of extremely intimate relationships that transcend privileged and conflated notions of gender and sexuality. Tatonetti's reading flattens the complexity of Seymour and Aristotle's relationship and serves as too easy an explanation for the problems that exist between the two.

In this way, Alexie depicts the ambiguities that exist between close relationships, which in this instance might be best described as "homosocial" rather than "homosexual." Audre Lorde's idea of the erotic- of human connections and passions (education, art, hobbies, etc) - into which we pour ourselves

may be an accurate way to describe Seymour and Aristotle's relationship. In her piece, "The Erotic as Power," Lorde describes the erotic in terms of joy: "The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" (56). Aristotle and Seymour's erotic connection comes from the closeness they had as childhood friends, as well as the complexity of their developing relationships.

Estrada writes, confirming my assertions, "Ambiguously queer, Alexie effectively destabilizes pure Native American heterosexuality and homosexuality by presenting permutations of erotic desire between Seymour and other male and female-bodied characters" (113). Indeed, the complexity of the erotic continuum is not limited to only Aristotle. Agnes and Seymour, too, have an erotic connection. Interestingly, they share the same name: the character is Agnes Roth Adams and the actor that plays Seymour is Evan Adams- yet another liaison between the real world and the imagined film world. In many ways, Agnes acts as his double, the "yin" to his "yang." Indeed, she is the first one with whom Seymour confides his sexual orientation in college, arguably because their awkward experimentations confirm Seymour's suspicions of his orientation.

When they meet again on the reservation, Seymour says, "I don't know why we let sex get in the way. I mean, I can't slip you the old tomahawk twenty minutes of every day but I can give you the best things you've ever had for the other 23:40." Keeping with Alexie's desire for multiple perspectives, Agnes equates it differently saying, "I wouldn't want just part of you. I'd want at least 51%." Ultimately they know such a relationship between them cannot exist, though they both seem to long for it in some ways, especially Agnes, who's affection for Seymour is paramount to her character. They imagine their children running around, but both know that such a created reality cannot exist. "It's like kissing my own sister," Seymour says to her after they try to have a physically intimate moment.

However, the erotic connection that Agnes and Seymour share is both emotional and intellectual; when Seymour returns to the reservation, they fall back into their humorous banter, often finishing each

others thoughts. Even, though their relationship does not include a physically sexual element, they nonetheless share an intimate bond. Thus, through the depictions of the erotic connections between Seymour and Aristotle as well as Seymour and Agnes, Alexie complicates the homosexual/heterosexual binary, choosing instead to depict fractured and complicated interpersonal relationships. The film confronts a rigid understanding of such social categories of identification, and refuses it by incorporating such fluidity in characters' identities and life experiences.

## Chapter 4

### Dualities and Paradoxes

*The Business of Fancydancing* seeks to expose how many of the ways in which we understand the world (such as identity) are indeed partially *constructed* realities. Dualities and paradoxes- all marked by constantly shifting elements- construct a creative project that desires to represent real complexity rather than simplifying characters to fit neatly into their temporal existence, as is customary in film. Alexie blends multiple worlds, various personalities, mediums, conversations, and questions while speaking to assorted audiences. In the first section, this paper attempted to untangle what can be carried from one medium to another: from Alexie's poems to his film. It also investigated the space between Alexie as a "real world" author and Seymour, as the poet character in the "film world." This section of the paper will illuminate how Alexie is rethinking the complexities and paradoxes of both identities themselves as well as the ways in which we epistemologize identity politics.

Instead of rigidly defining distinctions between real and created realities, Alexie's project muddles such categories, and by doing so resists assumptions that such terrains can be fixed beyond any sort of temporal position. For example, Seymour transgresses the boundaries between Indian and white, another marked intersectionality (as is the decision to live on or off the reservation). Doubly, he ethnic existence depends on his relationship to the space around him. Evidently Seymour is a walking paradox: both an Insider and an Outsider on his reservation, both an Insider and Outsider in the white literary world. The juxtaposition between his utilization of the terms "gay" and "two-spirit" is also notable. In similar ways, Alexie breaks down rigid boundaries between the sexual and the erotic and experiments with the unsettling nature of their conflation. Mouse, too, is portrayed as being both dead and alive, both concretely real and ghostlike—a character who exists also, only is displaced pieces.

All of these dualities and paradoxes are carefully situated to create a middle ground for balance.

While Alexie's project relies on experimenting with unsettled grounds of representation, he demonstrates the possibility of harmonious representation. Out of all the characters, Agnes is most balanced, as she is the "bridge-maker" in disputes. When she dances, her scarf is purple, symbolically the balanced color between red and blue. Interestingly, Seymour's color is red (red shorts, red shirt) and Aristotle's hue is blue (jean jacket). Agnes' balance helps to mediate between conflicts; her presence reminds others to keep the balance. She has effectively managed multiple identities on the reservation. For example, she uses her "white" education to teach Indian students. Additionally, she says Jewish prayers over Mouse, so it's clear that other parts of her identity co-exist in her lived experience harmoniously.

Though he admires Agnes for her strength, Seymour has difficulty in finding his own balance since he positions his Indian and gay identities in opposition. The only scenes where his identities can converge are in the artistic fancydancing scenes where he performs the Shawl Dance. The dance "queers" Seymour, as it is intended to be performed only by women (Youngberg 63). In that space, he is marked both as two-spirit (queer) and Native American. But when he strips off the regalia, is he shedding the Indian identity or the *commodification* of the Indian identity? Is this the first step in a twelve-step program to ease his fetish of self-commodification? Will he still write Indian, still perform his Indian identity for white market consumption? Paradoxically, the film ends not with a decision but rather a sense of ambivalence that his normative gay city life will never be the same. In his article, "Alexie's Nutshell," Hausman articulates this paradox:

Alexie could conclude the film by solidifying Seymour's exclusion and alienation. Rather than end with an either/or scenario, however, the film ends with both/and. Alexie allows Seymour the chance to choose, once again, between the reservation and the city. Apparently, Seymour chooses both options. The film ends by literalizing Seymour's dualisms. We see two Seymours. One Seymour screams and cries to the audience (without offering any specific words) and stays on the reservation. The other Seymour says nothing at all to the audience, then

walks to his car and drives back to Seattle. Agnes is the only character to respond to this Seymour's lack of words, and she does so in song. The song itself enacts this dualism. (97)

In this passage, Hausman notes Seymour's lack of words at Mouse's funeral. Paradoxically, the poet who has no qualms with spewing skewed realities to his literary audiences cannot find anything to say at the memorial of his friend. The loss of his friend results in the loss for words, an inability to express all the trauma he has run from for ten years. The dual representation of Seymour's image further depicts his destabilized subjectivity. Agnes' response is to sing in the traditional tongue—both Alexie's way of insulating the film with some traditionalism, though as Paula Gunn Allen notes,

Most [Native Americans] speak English as their first and only language, and at least two-thirds live in urban and suburban communities a large part of the time. Many have no idea what their "tradition" is or might have been, nor do they think of their modernity as a tragedy. (4)

Indeed, the song itself is a paradox: for audiences unfamiliar with the language, it appears as if Agnes covers for Seymour's sudden departure, by singing Mouse his memorial song. But when one considers the translation, it is obvious the song is addressed to Seymour:

Who are you when you turn your back?

Where do you go when you leave here?

You can't hide from your truth

Can't run from where you belong

Some things you can't choose

Sometimes you can't have it all

I know your dreams remind you

Where you belong

Memories hold tight  
 When there's no comfort in white arms  
 Loneliness will bring you back  
 Where you belong  
 (Alexie 134)

The song acts as a voiceover in the magical realism-eque scene with two Seymours, one of which drives away from the reservation while the other stays, watching his own self leave. Hausman reads this scene as Seymour both *belonging* and *not belonging* (98). He writes,

And like many of Alexie's protagonists, Seymour can choose where he resides, but he does not fully exist on or off the reservation. He is drawn to write about the reservation, even though he does not live there. As he tells the prying journalist, "Every time I sit down to write a new poem, I want it not to be about the reservation, but the reservation just won't let me go." Seymour paradoxically exists in both places, present through absence and vice versa. (99)

Indeed, there the paradoxical nature of this character remains unavoidable. However, this research reads somewhat differently: he *cannot* exist in both places, because he consciously creates fractures between his present life and his past life as well as between his intersectionalities of identity. Instead, he lives vicariously through his stories, which are only a collection of skewed truths and extended lies, and not constitutive of any comfortable assurance of home and belonging. Paradoxically, he exists *nowhere*, except "the belly of the whale" of ghostlike imaginations and muted memories.

## Chapter 5

### Introduction, Part 2

For a moment, I want to set aside the musings on Alexie's film, *The Business of Fancysdancing*, in order to fully consider the complexity of identity of another film in order to make some final comparisons in the conclusion. Both films nonetheless engage in the contemporary epistemology of identity politics in order to renegotiate and respond to evolving rhetoric of identity development. In the film, *Transamerica* (2005), director Duncan Tucker, deconstructs normative ideas about gender in order to create a story that focuses on the universal struggles of parenthood rather than the queerness of its characters. *Transamerica* details the journey of Sabrina 'Bree' Osborne (formerly Stanley Schupak), a transsexual woman in the process of transitioning from male to female. She receives a call from the New York City police department about an alleged son, Toby, picked up for hustling and petty drugs. Bree faced with insistence from her therapist, Margaret, she must deal with such unresolved issues before her surgery. Bree unhappily flies to New York to meet her son for the first time, both frightened at who she will meet and worried that she won't make it to her surgery in time. Initially hiding her identity, Bree humorously tells Toby that she is from "The Church of the Potential Father," when bailing him out of jail. Economically stressed, partly due to the high cost of transitioning, Bree doesn't have enough to fly them both back to LA. Instead, the two embark on a cross-country journey of epic proportions, learning along the way about themselves and each other, even their most hidden secrets.

The style of Tucker's film differs drastically from Alexie's articulation of multiplicity in *The Business of Fancysdancing*. Instead, *Transamerica* acutely focuses on telling an endearing story using traditional film methods that focus on making the camera invisible. Instead, the focus is intimately centered on the characters, Bree and Toby, and the people that they come into contact during their journey. Whereas Alexie wants audiences to be aware of multiple angles/perspectives (and thus, cameras

are intentionally used as part of the film), Tucker remains more interested in making the camera disappear for audiences in order to get closer to the characters. Both methods complement each director's vision for representing intersectionality of identity in ways I will discuss later.

For now, it is important to note, Alexie's interests lie in examining the fissures, the intersections of upheaval in identities negotiating multiple spaces of belonging. Tucker's project, however, invests in depicting the process of how parts of identities come together to make an individual more "whole." *Transamerica* appeals to universal experiences (ie: coming of age, parenthood) in order to create characters likable yet out of typical constructions of an American. Because of its accessibility in basic plot and film technique, its redefinition on who should be considered "American," and its appeal to universalism rather than disjointed identity, *Transamerica's* construction is designed for mainstream audiences.

Inherently a "road movie," *Transamerica* works closely with traditional modes of storytelling and carefully keeps the closeness to the characters. The road movie genre provides, especially with common themes of journey and change, an appealing generic framework that lends itself to a story about transgressing gender. *Transamerica* joins other transgressive road movies like *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), *Thelma and Louise* (1991), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar* (1995), and *Boys on the Side* (1995), each queering the genre in different ways. It is through this humorous road movie genre that *Transamerica* normalizes depictions of transsexual identity.

Editors Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark in the collection, *The Road Movie Book* cite Timothy Corrigan on defining aspects of a road movie:

As "a genre traditionally focused, almost exclusively, on men and the absence of women" (143), the road movie promotes a male escapist fantasy lining masculinity to technology and defining the road as a space that is at once

resistant to while ultimately contained by the responsibilities of domesticity:

home life, marriage, employment” (2-3)

While Corrigan may be correct with earlier films that originally defined the genre, clearly *Transamerica* isn't the first to queer this construction, though its integration into normativity may be unique. In terms of masculinity, Bree whole-heartedly rejects the status of male, and it is technology that is helping her create her femininity. Toby, the young man with escapist realities, demonstrates fluidity much more than a solid assertion of manhood. And with the relationship that develops between Bree and Toby, the road becomes a much-needed domestic space. Rather than rejecting notions of home, *Transamerica* is searching for them.

Though Cohan and Hark also assert that a road movie “responds to the breakdown of the family unit,” *Transamerica* showcases the breakdown of one family unit as much as it demonstrates the building of another, defined by terms that work for the individuals rather than tired scripts and assigned roles (2). Additionally, *Transamerica* queers the “heterosexual courtship” typical of many road films (8) in several ways which will be investigated later. In short, the road movie framework offers rich ground for exploring multiple senses of the word “journey,” a concept particularly crucial to these characters’ coming-of-age process.

Obviously, there is a literal journey through the landscapes of the American countryside, but there is also (perhaps more important) journey both Bree and Toby go through, a process of great identity and bodily transformation. The film asserts a journey to “wholeness” in several ways, which will be explored. Through examining the role of voice, investigating journeys of change, and examining both the queering and normalizing functions of the film, this thesis will outline some of the functions and tensions that are represented.

## Chapter 6

### Negotiating Voice and Social Expectation

The metaphoric and literal voice plays an important role for the articulation of agency in Tucker's *Transamerica*. Bree's voice in its shifting, performative manner creates both a medium of declaration as well as a marker of gender. With the film's progression, it's clear that voice serves a purpose as the metaphor for the film. As the protagonist, Bree's voice is emphasized more than Toby's but both are on a journey essentially, to find their voices. Learning to use one's voice, allows one to gain access to declaring self-identification. As a locus of self-expression in a verbal society, voice is the medium in which individuals are able to express who they are to the outside world. In his article, "*Transamerica* (2005): The Road to the Multiplex after New Queer Cinema," Gary Needham writes,

*Transamerica* is explicit in asking the audience to consider how gender can be constituted in different ways and made meaningful by common-sense cultural assumptions, family relations, prejudices, and stigmas, as well as medical and psychiatric discourses. *Transamerica* is important because it prompts an audience, otherwise alien to an affective identification with a transsexual woman, to empathize with and acknowledge the complexities of her gender. (54)

Indeed, the film negotiates conversations around transsexual gender identity, ultimately advocating that an individual's thoughts and inner dialogues are more important than any socially, medically, or psychiatrically - influenced assertions. The humorous likability of Bree's character makes an emotional appeal to the audience and invites them to also consider which dialogues should be privileged in an individual's decision to modify their body and identity.

As discussed in the introductory passage of this thesis, road movies, as a genre, serve as excellent vehicles for negotiating what constitutes an American identity, often "problematizing the uniform identity of

the nation's culture" (Cohan and Hark 1). Using the road film as a progressive framework for transsexual representation, *Transamerica* makes no promise that Bree's experience is a universal transsexual experience. Instead, the film brings up questions of voice and agency when defining a person. Though Bree's voice is strong, she can only speak for herself. The film follows her progression of transitioning closely, and the voice serves as a marker for gauging Bree's inner state. Indeed, through this narrativization of gender nonconformity, the perspective privileged and most present is Bree's own voice.

The first scene of the film, where Bree is putting on cosmetics as if it is war paint, audiences are first introduced to her voice. "This is the voice I want to use," she carefully mimics from a recording, practicing feminine tone and inflection. With this short introductory scene, *Transamerica* immediately sets the stage for multiple senses of the idea of "voice." First, Bree's voice makes gender performativity transparent to audiences who are aware of the extreme care she puts into presenting as female. Second her voice asserts her identity knowledgably, and when confronted, she utilizes deadpan humor to express herself to others in times of stress. Lastly, voice is as much technologically constructed as it is individually constructed; the video tutorial and record player featured in Bree's house subtly draw attention to how technology can change and alter the voice (Needham 58).

When audiences first meet Bree as she practices the voice she wants to use, it's clear that voice is a construction of performativity. By putting on feminine (but conservative) clothing, applying copious amounts of makeup, and practicing her voice in the mirror, Bree works to perfect the performance of her femininity so that she may "pass" as a cisgender female. For Bree, to "go stealth," means that she can blend in as "normal" (as opposed to transsexual); she must first be able to naturalize her performativity and complete the surgeries she finds necessary all while maintaining feminine articulations of speech.

First introduced by queer/feminist theorist, Judith Butler, gender has contemporarily been considered performative. She writes in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, that such performances are not a single acts, but rather, a lifetime of culturally constituted behaviors. Butler writes, "Performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and ritual, which achieves its effects through its

naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (xv). In *Transamerica*, Bree’s performance thus becomes an intrinsic part of her identity. The performance is most apparent at the beginning of the film when she is still insecure and thus spends time practicing; however, there are moments throughout the film where audiences hear her mutter, “This is the voice I want to use,” reminding herself (and audiences) of her femininity and her performativity. As Butler explains,

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted social temporality. (179, emphasis original)

Like Butler asserts, Bree must constantly perform her gender, repeating and improving upon stylized acts that assert a gender socially. Whereas cisgender people are not particularly conscious at any given time of their performance of gender (and thus have the illusion that gender is innate), Bree’s awareness of her own gender identification is acute: she attempts to compensate for any masculine digressions when they arise. As Needham writes, “It is important to consider voice, not just because the film begins with a voice that performs gender but also because queer voices draw attention to the regulatory practices that define voices as normatively gendered” (56). By watching Bree practice performativity and following her through her journey where her voice gains strength, her queer voice normalizes as she gains more ease in presenting as female and the masculine articulations are finely combed out of her linguistic patterns. This process *does* draw attention to how well she performs (both in appearance and voice) femininity. Curious to note is that Felicity Huffman’s own performance becomes overtly obvious in times where Bree’s female voice breaks down. Its

effect queers any remnants of Stanley's voice, normalizing not Bree's "natural" voice but rather, the constructed one. Through the reality that the actress is female, audiences are hyperaware of Huffman's performance of a MtF transsexual, but ironically, her performance reaffirms and maintains the character's gender performance.

In the beginning, almost every aspect of Bree's performance is tight, stuffy, and old-fashioned; her femininity borders on bizarre, as audiences pick up on the little ambiguities or motions that queer her femininity. As the story progresses, however, aspects of Bree's performance loosen, she becomes more comfortable, and her voice naturalizes. As Butler elaborates,

If gender is a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint. Moreover, one does not 'do' one's gender alone. One is always "doing" with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary. (1)

Though in the beginning, Bree struggles with the constant performance of femininity, even when she's alone, as she grows more comfortable with herself, her gender performance becomes more automatic and less stressed. Witnessing her progression helps to deconstruct notions that gender is arbitrarily assigned at birth, rather than embodied and performed by the individual.

However, any performance that is less than completely "feminine" risks revealing Bree's transsexual status. Needham asserts, "Throughout the film it is Bree's voice rather than her appearance that threatens to reveal the traces of Stanley and it often changes at moments when she is stressed" (56). While I agree with Needham that the voice is particularly hard to master and does falter in times of stress, I think his emphasis that the voice is the more revealing part of the performance is simply incorrect. Rather, *all* aspects of Bree's body performativity fall apart in times of great stress. Since American audiences are conditioned socially to regard others by their gender, we are particularly apt at picking up any so-called inconsistencies. For example, audiences see more masculine postures when Bree is in turmoil as the scene where she takes Toby back to his

apartment; appalled by the filth and the weight of meeting her son, Bree flops down on a bed, spreading her legs wide like a man, resting heavily on her knees. The pink dress she's wearing makes it readily apparent that it has not been designed to allow for such expansive leg movements. Such a visual is more shocking in its gross juxtaposition of the feminine (attire) and the masculine (posture) than any aural deepening of the voice.

An additional response to Needham's assertion is that in reality, many women *do* have deep voices that could be categorized as more "masculine," particularly if they are smokers, drinkers, and/or aging. Although Bree doesn't want her voice to sound masculine (thus voice training to keep up the stealth), I don't think her voice "outs" her any more than the rest of her performance.

Quite the opposite, Bree's voice actually saves her in times of stress. As she invokes the use of humor as a defensive tool, her voice is one of the few things that grants her any control in oppressive or confrontational situations. For example, when Dr. Spikowsky asks her how many medical procedures she's received, she responds, "The usual electrolysis, three years of hormone therapy, and facial feminization surgery. Brow lift, forehead reduction, jaw re-contouring and a tracheal shave..." By listing the surgeries, audiences further hear how much work goes into Bree's transformation. Thus, the representation of such transsexual travails gains a voice in mainstream film. Needham confirms:

*Transamerica* reveals just how much "work" goes into the construction of femininity. Importantly, it reveals femininity as a cultural rather than a natural construct, something that is imitative and can be molded by performance and shaped by surgery. It is not just about looking like or passing as a woman but also sounding like a woman and making people believe you are a woman. (57-8)

Indeed, by allowing audiences to see how much work goes into Bree's performance, the idea of gender as a natural phenomena disintegrates, as it becomes obvious how modification of the voice and body constitute gender. In the case of transsexuality, identity is very much tied to medical technology, particularly if one wants to alter their physical appearance in ways that normalize them as a specific gender. However, the film

demonstrates the tensions located within the medical field at the same time it shows how Bree uses humor to defuse such oppositions and oppressive rhetoric:

Dr. Spikowsky: The American Psychiatric Association categories gender dysphoria as a very serious mental disorder.

Bree: After my operation not even a gynecologist will be able to detect anything out of the ordinary about my body. I will be a woman. Don't you find it odd that plastic surgery can cure a mental disorder?

Though Bree is very much aware how she needs the label "gender dysphoric" in order to receive her surgeries, she rejects notions that she has a "very serious mental disorder." The medical definition of gender constructs transsexuality as pathology rather than performance. As Needham asserts, "We may ask at this point who is in control of this body and who defines it- psychiatry, culture, the state, Bree- and who decides when and if sexual reassignment surgery will go ahead" (58). As Bree raises objections to the medicalization of her body, she nonetheless must negotiate through the industry's terms if she wants alter her body to suit her desires. As Judith Butler explains in her book, *Undoing Gender*, there are problems with medicalizing transsexuality. She writes:

To be diagnosed with gender identity disorder (GID) is to be fond, in some way, to be ill, sick, wrong, out of order, abnormal, and to suffer a certain stigmatization as a consequence of the diagnosis being given at all. As a result, some activist psychiatrists and trans people have argued that the diagnosis should be eliminated altogether, that transsexuality is not a disorder, and ought not to be conceived of as one, and that trans people ought to be understood as engaged in a practice of self-determination, an exercise of autonomy. Thus, on the one hand, the diagnosis continues to be valued because it facilitates an economically feasible way of transitioning. (76)

The ‘diagnosis’ operates in several ways, but one way it can and does operate, (especially in the hands of those who are transphobic), is as an instrument of pathologization and stigmatization. Unfortunately, it is considered a necessary diagnosis if one wishes to legally and medically change their sex (Hausman, “Demanding Subjectivity”; Butler, *Undoing Gender*). Bree’s renegotiation of the terms allows audiences to see that she rejects such constructions that stigmatize her. Instead, throughout the film, she draws on anthropological knowledge about other cultures that recognize and support alternative constructions of gender. After the scene with Dr. Spikowsky, Bree returns to her home, and audiences can see her straighten a crooked photo of women with metal rings around their neck. Though subtle, the film points to beauty ideals such as this that exist outside American culture, pinpointing how such definitions are very much culturally determined.

Indeed, through mimesis of body styles and the appropriation of proper clothing, cosmetics and jewelry, Bree can perform and live as a woman. However, in order for her look to be more “complete,” she must undergo bodily transformation and modification. Just as much as it is culturally constructed, Bree’s identity as transsexual must be negotiated through advancements in technology. In her book, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*, feminist scholar, Teresa de Lauretis, notes that, “[Gender is] the product of various social technologies, such as cinema, as well as institutional discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices” (2). With the surgical and other medical practices, the transsexual body can undergo transformative procedures that physically alter the body to a normalized aesthetic of, in this case, a female form. It is only with hormones and surgeries can Bree transform her masculinized body into a more feminized one. In her article, “Demanding Subjectivity,” Bernice L. Hausman elaborates on how the technologies have expanded to suit the needs of transsexual clients:

In the first decades of this century, glandular therapies consisted of chemicals extracted or derived from the animal counterparts of glands normally found in the human body, injected to make up for the loss of such a gland or an abnormality in its secretory processes. The grafting of such glands was also

practiced. Once the active agents were isolated from the gland extracts and their chemical structures determined, the development of synthetic hormones was possible. These provided physicians with more exact methods of endocrine regulation, thus replacing gland extracts. The development of synthetic hormones has made the chemicals available in drug form, which had widespread implication in the context of transsexualism and intersexuality. Individuals can self-regulate hormonal therapies with both injectable and oral compounds. (283)

Indeed, as the technology has changed and evolved, we feasibly can reconstruct bodies that fool even professional eyes. Thus, through technology (hormonal and surgical), transsexual body modification has gained the ability of appearing more authentic-- albeit at tremendous financial cost to the individual as many insurances will not cover surgical procedures. Thus, Bree's voice is constricted only when economic and social oppositional instructions squash her agency in modifying her body and gender identity.

## Chapter 7

### The Journey of Change

Well I can't tell you where I'm going, I'm not sure of where I've been  
 But I know I must keep travelin' till my road comes to an end  
 I'm out here on my journey, trying to make the most of it  
 I'm a puzzle, I must figure out where all my pieces fit  
 Like a poor wayfaring stranger that they speak about in song  
 I'm just a weary pilgrim trying to find what feels like home  
 Where that is no one can tell me, am I doomed to ever roam  
 I'm just travelin', travelin', travelin', I'm just travelin' on

“Travelin’ Thru”- Dolly Parton

Specifically written for this film, the theme song by Dolly Parton pinpoints how *Transamerica* is more about a journey of finding oneself than it is a radical visualization of transsexual politics. Instead, the film draws on universal experiences of finding oneself and coming-of-age within the context of the American road experience. During the special features section of the DVD, Dolly Parton explains why the film has universal appeal: “I think all people can relate to many parts of this movie, especially just being trapped, struggling for your own identity, wanting to be loved and to be seen, to be known as who you are.” Indeed, by appealing to such universal sentiments, the film carves a space in the mainstream for untraditional characters like Bree and Toby. As Cohan and Hark suggest, “The road has always functioned in movies as an alternative space where isolation from the mainstream permits various transformative experiences” (5). Nonetheless, this isolation occurs in front of a mainstream audience, so it is important to consider how the film invokes the idea of “journey” in multiple ways.

Given very few visual markers of specific towns and states, the film makes apparent how geographic references are merely artificial constructs; what becomes more important are experiences had in the landscapes that the companions travel through on their American journey (Dalton 235). In “From Dad to Mom: Transgendered Motherhood,” Marie Dalton writes,

Of the other boundaries that Bree crosses on her journey, first a socially constructed boundary between male and female and later a biologically constructed boundary between man and woman, the most defining part of her journey in *Transamerica* is the trip from potential father to loving mother.”

(236)

Indeed, with the attention to characters, rather than the actual physical journey, *Transamerica* suggests that the specific places matter less than the ideas of identity and home they help to explore. In the beginning of the film, Bree and Toby are incomplete people, desperately searching for individual identities and meanings, both “trying to figure out where all [their] pieces fit.”

The film’s journey doesn’t truly begin until Bree receives a call from the New York Police department, explaining that a Mr. Stanley Schupack has a son in jail. Bree pretends that Stanley doesn’t live there anymore and tries to brush it off. The next day in conversation with her therapist, Margaret, she casually mentions the phone call. The scene displays Bree’s early desire to disavow her past life, distancing herself by saying, “He [Toby] claimed to be Stanley’s son.” Margaret reminds her, “Stanley’s life is your life,” and she refuses to sign her form consenting to the surgeries until Bree makes contact with her son, stating, “Bree, this a part of your body that cannot be discarded. ... I don’t want you to go through this metamorphosis only to find out you’re still incomplete.” As close friend and primary person of support, Margaret cares deeply for Bree’s well-being, knowing that Bree must learn about her son before she transitions fully. However as her therapist, Margaret has the authority to deny further surgical procedures on the basis of psychological issues. Bree, defeated, buys a plane ticket. Her anxieties about leaving the west coast stem from the fact that it takes a

long time to get an appointment for bottom (genital) surgery; Bree feels that she needs the final surgery to become “whole” and cannot bear the possibility that she might have return to a long waiting list.

When she arrives at the police station, it’s clear that Bree is uncomfortable with appearances. She struggles to identify herself and her relationship to her son:

Sergeant: Can I ask what your relationship is to the prisoner?

Bree: Allegedly I’m his- (she can’t bring herself to say “father”) Allegedly he’s my son.

Sergeant: This is a new one. According to this, he shoplifted a frog.

Bree: I beg your pardon?

Sergeant: Plus we have testimony that he was in possession of a small amount of a suspicious-looking white powder. Although emergency services was unable to recover the evidence.

Bree: Drugs. I suppose he’s an addict?

Sergeant: Most of them are.

Bree: Most of whom are?

Sergeant: Mr. Schupack-

Bree: Miss Schupack. I mean Miss Osborne. I changed it.

Sergeant: Do you know that your son’s been hustling on the streets? Working as a prostitute?

As exemplified, Bree struggles to describe both her relationship to Toby and her relationship to her past self, struggling between the gendered terms of parental roles (mother or father?) as well as nominal confusions between ‘Stanley Schupack’ and ‘Bree Osborne.’ Her discomfort with naming herself reveals her internal gender anxieties. Later in the film, there is a scene that mirrors this one. There are several repeating occurrences, such as this one; it’s particularly important to notice how as the circumstances resurface and how the characters negotiate them differently; often these scenes of duality signal great change in subjectivity.

Much later in the film, Bree must identify her relationship to Toby. While talking to authorities the second time, she doesn't falter-- "I'm his father"-- even raising an eyebrow in defiance of the transgression she voices. In that scene, she is met with no opposition from the officer who assures her that they will look for her son. With the increased confidence and respect for herself that she gains while traveling across the country with Toby, she holds herself differently, she speaks with composure, and it is clear she is closer to becoming complete in her identity.

But before she reaches that point in her development, she must first meet her son, the one she's been informed has been active with drugs and prostitution. The police release him to her, and Bree upon being prompted, says that she is from the "Church of the Potential Father," a quickly fabricated lie to hide her true identity. Toby appears twitchy and dangerous, just the "type" of person that Bree would normally avoid at all costs.

In his dingy "crack-house" apartment, she somewhat reluctantly hands him one hundred dollars, wishing out loud that he stop referring to her as "Dude" and distancing herself from him as much as possible. In return, Toby shows her a photo of his parents. There, audiences see what Bree used to look like when she went by 'Stanley.' The photograph strikes Bree hard, and she staggers to sit down, still processing that this youth is her son. At this moment, Bree's gender performance breaks down and old, masculine performances prevail. Legs spread widely, even in a dress, Bree delicately asks Toby, "Is there a ladies room in this establishment?" The juxtaposition of the gender binary of performativity becomes most obvious in moments like these. Likewise, Felicity Huffman's acting performance in these moments becomes comedic as it is almost overplayed that her performance is one of drag. Through Huffman's drag performance, Bree's own female gender performance, thus, is naturalized.

Later, Bree makes a phone call to her therapist. Evading parental duties, she tells Margaret that Toby is fine. However, Margaret accurately assesses the situation and tells Bree that she can't leave him. Dejected, Bree asks Toby to drive across the country, conserving the "Church's funds." Purchasing a beat-up vehicle from one of Toby's junkie friends, the two set off on their cross-country trip. In the beginning, they struggle

to relate to each other, and Bree, though taken with Toby, cannot yet feel a possessive responsibility for him.

The two characters create contrast in their differences as Dalton notes:

She is almost homely, and he is undeniably pretty. She is careful and guarded, and he is open and vulnerable. She is a prude and wears her matronly mantle to keep potential partners away, and he uses sex freely to gain leverage and get what he needs to survive. She strives for a transition toward what she perceives as culturally normative, and—for a child of the streets—he is remarkably transparent and naïve simultaneously, it is doubtful from the way his character is constructed that Toby has much of a framework for assessing what constitutes the normative. If Bree is “becoming undone” in the sense of knowingly undoing a normative conception of gender, we sense that Toby is not bound by the same sense of boundaries but also that his choices have not been made with a sense of knowing and choice (Butler 1). What they share beyond biology is a long history of pain. (237)

The stark contrasts in personality types make for an excellent antagonism that remains for total in the film. Throughout the course of their journey, each work to compliment and improve the other, however consciously or not. As Dalton notes, what is not readily apparent in the beginning of the film is both characters’ relationship to traumatically painful past homes. It is only when both characters are able to piece other other’s pain together can real revelations about the other occur. But first, they must journey together to understand the scars of past pains.

Toby’s pain is found out first as Bree searches for options to release any guilt she might have about abandoning him. They end up in Callicoon, a rural southern town in which Bree knows Toby has a stepfather; though she does not know the details, it’s clear that Toby didn’t want to go to Callicoon. When Toby awakens and realizes where they are, he becomes furious with Bree. Soon Arletty, Toby’s old neighbor, sees him and welcomes them into her home, but Toby seems ill at ease.

Later that night, Bree returns with Toby's stepfather, Bobby Jensen, thinking that she is happily reuniting long-lost family. Within a few moments, however, Bree and audiences quickly learn that the relationship has been one that has left Toby psychologically, physically, and sexually abused. Feeling cornered, Toby provokes Bobby by muttering something sexual, and the two exchange swings until Toby knocks him unconscious. Frightened, he looks at Bree with venom and runs out of the house. Bree tries to confront him, "This isn't my fault! You never told me *why* you didn't want to come home!" Toby ignores her, grabbing a sleeping bag and lantern.

When Bree returns by to Arletty's house, she is hit again with the dark trauma of his past, discovering that Toby's mother had committed suicide. Toby had found her body in the garage with the car on, and presumably, also witnessed Bobby's abuse of his mother. Bree realizes then that she cannot evade her duties as a parent. Toby has no one else he can call family, and she cares for him too much to abandon him. Though she has reservations about her own parenting ability, she feels it is not only her duty but desires to help Toby the best she can.

With some convincing they are soon on the road again, but it's clear that Toby hasn't forgiven her and he is still visibly shaken. Clearly traumatized from the previous night's events, he fumbles for his heroin and Bree protests, stopping the car suddenly. The two struggle with each other for a moment and Toby lifts a fist and screams, "Are you going to let me do my thing, or do I have to get out of this fucking car right now? Huh??" It's important that he doesn't actually hit her in this scene. Toby's traumatized, but respects social codes that make striking a woman unacceptable. (Later, after he learns Bree is his father, he *does* hit her. In that instance, she is not a transsexual woman; rather, she is his father and a person that has been lying to him all along.)

In the next scene, mellowed from the heroin bump, Toby stares off into space when the two reach a Tennessee roadside restaurant. The waitress approaches with drinks, "One chocolate milkshake, and coffee for your mother," she says. Toby quickly retorts, "She's not my mother." Bree confirms, "I'm not his mother." Soon afterwards, she moves to another table after Toby burps disgustingly. He looks particularly

strung out, the greasiest he's looked since he's been with Bree. The tension lays thick in the air and both have their judgments of the other.

For as many times as Bree extends a parental gesture, she withdraws, allowing Toby to make his own choices. As Mary Dalton points out, "She has also begun a delicate balancing act of trying to respect his individuality and autonomy while simultaneously trying to help him stay safe and envision a better life for himself than he's been able to imagine so far" (240). While I agree with Dalton's assertions, it is also important to note how Bree constantly doubts herself, particularly as a parent. She wants to help him, but that desire is metered by her confidence in her own abilities.

The next scene, audiences see the station wagon winding through valley roads and as the sun shines, Toby sleeps off his high. They stop at a gas station and we see Toby sneaking a joint behind the station and Bree's back. Toby's own gestures suggest that while he isn't going to let Bree stop his drug use, he nonetheless wants Bree to think highly of him, and thus, for the rest of the film, he sneaks most of his drug use. Additionally, he gets Bree to do things she doesn't want to do, like camp outside for the night. In small ways, he forces Bree to reconsider the rigidity she's developed through attempting to micromanage all aspects of her gender performance in order to downplay her biological history.

Obviously, though Toby's traumatic history has been laid bare, he isn't the only one hiding things. In Arkansas, the two travelers stop by a roadside café. While sitting at a table, a little girl turns around in her chair and inquires to Bree, "Are you a girl or a boy?" Her mother quiets her quickly, but Bree is mortified, sinking lower into her chair and hiding herself with the menu. Later, audiences see her calling Margaret for support: "Margaret? Thank God. I'm in the middle of Arkansas and an eight-year-old child just *read* me! I can't handle this. I had to camp out last night. On the ground. With *bugs!*" Meanwhile, Toby is playing a video arcade game; a random girl comes up to him and kisses him. Surprised, Toby doesn't reject, and soon they are intimately embracing. Bree notices, and asks Margaret to hold on. "Toby? Toby! Would you mind introducing me to your new friend?" The girl's father comes over and makes accusations, asserting that Toby will ruin some poor girl's life. Bree responds in a bulldog fashion, "You'd better watch out she doesn't end up

running some poor innocent boy's life!" She then tersely instructs Toby to go wait at the table for her, and continues her conversation with Margaret: "Margaret? I really don't think I'm cut out to be a mother."

Though the contrast in this scene is meant to be humorous, it also effectively draws attention to how she is developing and performing as a parental figure despite her self-professed doubts of her capabilities. This idea reinforces itself in the next scene when she asks Toby to eat his vegetables.

As the two travel across the country landscapes, first through hills and then flat fields, Bree and Toby continue to form a unique bond. Audiences learn about Toby's interests, that he is intelligent, that he likes animals, and has goals in life. He defies stereotypes of a "junkie" and a "hooker." Bree encourages him to make higher goals, and their drives constitute an informal education. She divulges to him that she studied a lot of things in college-- French, cultural anthropology, archeology, psychology, and art history-- but ultimately couldn't decide what she wanted to do. Her intellectual past is curious, especially juxtaposed against her gender transitioning. Although she has difficulty in making an educational commitment, presumably because she has many different interests, Bree has absolutely no reservations about transitioning.

When they stop at the transsexual house party in Dallas, Bree is terrified that Toby will learn of her transsexual status, but word quickly gets around and the secret remains safe. Although uncomfortable in such an open setting, Bree watches how Toby interacts with everyone; it's clear that his openness surprises and encourages her, and though she doesn't share her transsexual identity with him then, she opens up to him in other ways.

After their stop in Dallas, it's clear the two have bonded more fully. They drive onwards, sharing stories, knowledge, and laughter. That night, however, Bree's secret is unexpectedly revealed to Toby. When Bree's diuretic kicks in and they have nowhere to stop for a restroom, they make a roadside pit stop. In the rear view mirror, Toby catches a glimpse of her member when she accidentally reveals herself, spooked by a car.

Feeling betrayed, Toby doesn't unleash his inner turmoil until later in the hotel room, he lights a cigarette in defiance. Even still, they are not on even ground, as Toby doesn't know that Bree and his father

are the same person. Bree becomes aware something has upset him but doesn't realize that he knows she's transsexual. The next day, the tension between the two remains; Bree tries to ignore him, chattering about UFOs but Toby remains silent. "You know, social ostracism doesn't work in a community of two," she says to him. When Toby doesn't respond she sighs, "Damn it, Toby! Say something!"

Toby, upon seeing a sign for a roadside attraction, tells her wants to go to Sammy's Wigwam. Among novelty tomahawks and arrowheads, Toby confronts her, embarrassing her in front of Sammy. When Sammy says something to him about listening to his mother, he responds: "She's not my mother. She's not anybody's mother. She's not even a real woman. She's got a dick. (to Bree) Don't you? Go on, tell him!"

Bree, surprised and absolutely mortified, turns and walks back to the car as dignified as she can. Toby screams, "You're a fucking lying *freak!*" But hurries after her, realizing that his outburst has really hurt her feelings. The tensions between the two are revealing as Toby also explains his hurt at her withholding her gender identification history from him:

Toby: What do you want out of me?

Bree: Just because a person doesn't go around blabbing her entire biological history to everyone she meets doesn't make her a liar.

Toby: Then why didn't you just tell me the truth?

Bree: So you could humiliate me in public even sooner?

In this scene, Toby's outburst expresses his hurt that Bree withheld the truth from him; he appears to be more hurt that she didn't trust him more than he is appalled by her "freak" status of gender limbo. He is particularly hurt because Bree knows the ugly parts of his past and hasn't shared the knowledge of hers with him:

Toby: You knew all about me. ... Why'd you bail me out of jail? What, you just walked into jail, asked them who need help? ... You know what, fuck you. I never even heard of a trannie church lady. You can drop me off in the next town.

Bree: So you think I don't have the right to belong to a church? My body may be a work in progress but there is nothing wrong with my soul. ...Jesus made me this way for a reason, so that I could suffer and be reborn, the way he was.

Toby: So you're cutting your dick off for Jesus?

Bree: That's not how it works. I'll just have an innie instead of an outie.

The multiple ways in which they negotiate the transsexual issue in this scene are important to the overall construction of the film. Bree counters his implication that she doesn't belong in a church since she is transsexual. By likening the transsexual process with the rhetoric of suffering and being reborn, Bree is able to create religious support for her transformation. At the same time, she retorts, using humor to describe the surgical process in the simplified terms of having an "innie instead of an outie."

Toby, though clearly upset, gets in the car, this time opting for the back seat in an effort to distance himself. Before the drive away, a hippie hitchhiker asks for a ride, and though Bree protests, Toby slides over for him. While offering Toby "a toke(n) of [his] appreciation," he asks him, "She's cool, right?" Toby responds, "She's not a she. She's got a dick." Bree, mortified, turns around and yells at him, but receives an unlikely response from the hitchhiker. When she explains that she is a "transsexual woman," he says, "Wow. I think transsexuality is a radically evolved state of being." This statement clears the air between the car's occupants and they head down the road, ending up at a desert waterhole where they stop to swim. As the boys strip down to swim, Bree, encouraged by the hippie's support, explains how many societies recognize gender outside the binary of male and female:

Bree: Many societies throughout history have honored and revered transgender people. The Zulu, the Yoruba. The Native Americans called us two spirit people.

Hitchhiker: Two spirits. I like that.

Toby: Tell him what they're going to do with your dick.

Bree: (ignoring him) Then the settlers came. They tended to murder us on sight.

Hitchhiker: The way the white man treated the Indian was very deeply fucked up.

Toby: Yeah.

Hitchhiker: Are you sure you won't join us?

Toby: Come on. We now what you've got.

Bree: You boys go ahead. Have fun.

A little more settled from the confrontation, Bree is content to hold back, acting like a lady and waits for the boys to finish swimming. She looks longingly at their naked bodies- not out of sexual desire but out of the desire to regard her own body with such freedom. When the hitchhiker goes to car to "show them something," Bree asks Toby if he still thinks she's a freak. "You're not a freak... you're just a liar." At that moment, they hear the ignition turn over as the hippie steals their car, and unexpectedly, they are united again.

Walking along a New Mexico dirt road, Bree and Toby eventually get picked up by a truck full of Mexican laborers, who drop them off at a diner. Toby disappears for a while. Bree thinks that he is selling the heroin, but in actuality, audiences see his real activities. The two scenes are juxtaposed: one where Bree is looking at herself in the mirror of the women's bathroom, trying to fix her makeup and hair and the other where Toby in the men's bathroom, also in front of a mirror, makes eyes with a trucker who's looking for a hustle.

Bree, walking back into the restaurant, sits at the bar, and waits for Toby to return. Eyeing up an abandoned tip, she goes to take it from under a plate when she spots a man watching her. Embarrassed, she takes a French fry from the plate instead. "Having a tough day?" he asks introducing himself as Calvin Manygoats, offering to buy her lunch and give them a lift. From their short interaction, it's clear that Calvin is enamored by her-- just when she thinks she looks the worst, she gets courted. Clearly she is both unaccustomed and flattered by his attention. When Toby returns, he picks up on the flirtation, feeling a mix of jealousy as well as perhaps a sense of protectiveness towards his "freaky" Christian benefactor.

Stuck with no other options, Bree has Calvin drop them off at her parent's house. Unable to muster up the courage to face her parents (she tells people that they are dead), Bree sends Toby to ring the doorbell and

ask for Bree's sister, Sydney. When that fails, Bree faces her parents, Elizabeth and Murray, whom she clearly hasn't seen in years.

Soon, Toby and film audience learn through vague mentions of institutionalization and suicide attempts, that Bree's history with her parents is as fraught with shame as Toby's own. During the interrogations, audiences see that Bree's mother has no personal boundaries and objectifies Bree by grabbing her crotch, exclaiming, "Thank God, Murray. He's still a boy!" The mother's assertion presents an interesting construction, equating a person's gender status by their genitals. While Bree's outward appearance is unmistakably female at this point in the film, Tucker shows how rhetoric of gender based upon physical characteristics constitute the dominant normative construction.

Though Murray is less vocal about his objections, it's clear that both parents do not respect Bree's body or Bree's choices. Elizabeth sees Bree's transgressions as a personal offence. "How could you do this to me?!" she moans, particularly worried about what the neighbors think. Bree responds: "I'm not doing anything to you! I'm gender dysphoric. It's a genetic condition." Quite purposefully, Bree takes up the problematic rhetoric of the medical field, claiming gender dysphoria to help normalize her choices in the eyes of her parents. Cowan notes that such narratives, though not necessarily internal beliefs, are often necessary to give meaningful substance to her claim by using terminology otherwise used to pathologize her condition (248).

Sydney is more understanding than her parents but is still a little confused by it. It's clear there are some jealousy issues between the two siblings, particularly because Sydney's personal issues with alcoholism have been scrutinized with Bree's absence. Still she tries to understand though it is difficult. As she helps Bree pick out a dress from their mother's closet, she says, "This is so bizarre. I can still see Stanley in you, but it's like you put yourself through a strainer and got rid of all the boy pulp." Nonetheless the siblings are able to find a dress, and Bree steps into the living room, to see what her family thinks. Her mother's reaction is negative, but Toby compliments her, to which she visibly brightens.

At the restaurant, Bree's mother, still flustered from Bree's pretty-in-pink appearance, insists that Bree act like a gentleman and help his mother into her seat. Though the two silently struggle, Bree, "like the son she used to be," helps her mother, conforming to a gender role she no longer desires to perform. Toby ultimately redeems the scene by asking to get a picture of him and Bree; afterwards, he helps her into her chair. A lady notices and comments, "It's so nice to see a young man being so polite to his mother." Hostile, Elizabeth remarks, "That's not his mother." However, unknowingly, Toby gestures *do* fulfill the performative role of a "good son."

Even if Toby and (to a lesser extent) Sydney can accept Bree, her mother is unable to accept Bree's identity. Later during dinner, Elizabeth melodramatically insists that she misses her son. "Mom, you never had a son." They continue to argue and audience members see Bree most insecure, falling prey to her mother's verbal abuse. Trying to gain composure, she mutters something about her cycle being out of whack. "You don't have cycles!" Elizabeth shrieks at her. Bree asserts herself, replying, "Hormones are hormones. Yours and mine just happen to come in little purple pills." This particular argument that Bree puts forth also invokes the use of medical rhetoric in order to make claims of personhood. Whereas Elizabeth uses hormones (presumably after menopause), Bree also uses them to regulate female hormones in her own body. It's important to note that transsexuals going through surgery must suspend their hormone use for a short period before surgery; though the film's timeline would in reality, constrict Bree's use, I believe has been included despite this technicality in order for the film to expose how "hormones are hormones," no matter a person's ability to produce them themselves or consume them via medical prescriptions. Efforts to simplify the complexities of transsexual realities are problematic, but nonetheless necessary to simplify information for unfamiliar audiences.

Elizabeth, unsatisfied, but defeated, abandons her attack on Bree and turns instead to Toby. She offers Bree money to get back to LA on the condition that Toby stay with them. She offers Toby a vision of his own little apartment, tennis at the country club, and a loving family. Toby is stunned at the generosity but also remains weary of her motivations.

Later, Toby discusses the offer with Bree who tells him, “I think you ought to do whatever you think is best for you. But if you want, you can come and live with me. I can’t give you anything like this, but I’m sure we can manage something.” Toby doesn’t give her an answer then, but they talk about Bree’s suicide attempt, as she intrigues Toby with her own stormy past. He asks her, “Did you really try to kill yourself?” To which she replies, “I swallowed half a bottle of Nebutal. Then I panicked and called 911.” When Toby says, “Maybe you’re not the suicidal type.” Bree responds, “Maybe. Or maybe my mother’s right and I just can’t stick to a decision.” Though Bree knows that she will probably never receive the love and support of her mother, she nonetheless wishes she could receive her approval. Her own parenting abilities are positioned against the failures of her parents. She may not be able to perform them in traditional ways due to her transsexuality, but offers him a place to stay when they get to LA.

That night, all of Bree’s secrets are revealed to Toby. Touched by her kindness and also a bit confused on the role he’s supposed to play in her life, Toby knocks on her door, intending to seduce her. They make small talk for a few moments before he suddenly reaches in to kiss her full on the lips. Bree, unaccustomed and starved for physical touch, allows for the transgression for the briefest of moments before she recoils:

Bree: Mmm- What are you doing?

Toby: What I’m good at. (He shrugs out of his robe)

Bree: Oh, no. No, no.

Toby: It’s okay. I want to. You’ll like it. I promise.

Bree: I don’t want to like it. I don’t want it at all.

Toby: (hurt) Okay. (He turns away from her) I’ll marry you if you want. I don’t care how big your place is. I just want to be with you. I think you’re sexy Bree.

It’s like – Like I see you.

Toby makes one last-ditch effort to seduce Bree, and although not an ideal time, knows she must tell him the truth. Bree starts by first confessing that she is not exactly affiliated with the church. She directs his attention

to the photo album at which she had been looking. Toby sees a photograph of his mother and father. Perplexed he says, “It’s my mom and dad.” Bree replies, “It’s your mom and me.” In a flush of embarrassment and realization, he flees the room. Bree follows, apologizing profusely, attempting to smooth things over. When she grabs his arm, Toby hits her hard and she falls to the ground. This time the threat of violence is realized, as he isn’t hitting Bree- the trannie Church lady; he’s hitting his father, despite his outburst: “You are *not* my father!” Quickly, he leaves Bree’s parents house; the only thing Bree can do is file a police report before heading to her surgery.

After her surgery, Bree is in tears not because she has made a mistake with the transition and not because of the amount of pain she’s in, but because Toby is missing from her life. They’ve spent less than a week on the road together and left each other on pretty bad terms, but she senses his loss acutely. She tries to keep up a humorous pretense for Margaret, but Bree’s sobs appeal to the humanity of even the most conservative audiences, as we are invited into her intimately raw emotional landscape. Bree feels like she messed the relationship up and cannot let go of the desire to see her son. “It hurts!” she cries to Margaret, who replies, “Yes, honey, that’s what hearts do.”

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After her final transition, Bree has been promoted to a waitress position at the Mexican restaurant instead of dishwasher. Post surgery (and post cross-country journey), Bree is much more at ease presenting in public; her new position exemplifies this drastic change as does her clothing selection which is much looser than the stuffy polyester pink suit we first see her wear. Additionally, she practices Spanish with the owners of the restaurant, suggesting, too, that she is expanding her voice, learning to communicate in multiple languages. Ironically enough, gaining a voice for her is as much about gaining anonymity as it is about declaring herself. Her ability to grasp a sense of voice helps to situate her in dominant paradigms, blending in and destabilizing and sense of queer subjectivity.

In the final scene when Toby finds her apartment, he tells her first and foremost that he isn’t forgiving her. He asks her if she “did it,” meaning the surgery and she says yes, inviting him inside. Awkwardly, the

two reunite and test each other's boundaries Toby gets out a cigarette, and Bree obliges by getting him a plate to use as an ashtray, insisting that he get his feet off the coffee table. Toby tells her that he's been working in the gay porn industry and shows her an advertisement, simultaneously seeking both shock and approval. It's clear he's testing her boundaries, and as a third final test, he asks her for a beer. He's asked her for alcohol before, but she has always refused. This time, however, they appear to be on even ground, and thus, they share beers together, like father and son. Bree's gender transgression into the realm of masculinity is manifested now only in small gesture (when he can't open the bottle, she does) and in the symbolic (the act of sharing beers is a homosocial activity). By ending this way, the film asserts that the body or gender of a person doesn't negate how well they can care for and relate to their children.

The film doesn't go so far as to suggest that now Bree's completely normalized everything in the past is past. There is less an emphasis of abandoning past beings than on becoming at peace with them; Bree doesn't run away from Stanley as they are, quite literally, one and the same. The emphasis instead is on the journey that people go through, instigated by various processes of intense change in their lives as well as how special people, can provide all the "family" that one needs. The bond Bree and Toby share isn't simply a parent/child one, but also one of complementary attributes and tendencies. As Dalton confirms, "The labels don't matter; whether Bree is a father who mothers her child or a mother who started out as a father becomes irrelevant. She is Toby's loving parent, they are home together, and both of their lives will be enriched by the connection" (248). Absolutely the connection they share, and particularly now that the roles have been defined more clearly, Bree and Toby's future together holds up not only as a possibility but also a probability. The films' tagline, "Life is more than the sum of its parts," enforces this idea of wholeness of both characters at the end of the film.

## Chapter 8

### Queering Lives

*Transamerica*'s queer intentions end up being a lot subtler than *The Business of Fancydancing*. With a focus on normalizing Bree's transsexuality in favor of an emphasis on the business of parenting, Tucker's film envisions itself as a film with universal themes of coming of age and journey, however there are important moments of transgression that complicate that sweeping assertion. In this section, I will demonstrate the ways in which the film defies normative constructions and how it queers lives. In the section that follows, I then focus how the film largely subverts its transgressive subtleties in favor of widening normative gender constructions.

Perhaps the queerest character in *Transamerica* is not Bree, but rather, Toby. Also on a coming of age journey, Toby's character does not have a set direction like Bree does. Rather, he is still in the process of trying new things in search of something that works for him. The only thing constant with Toby is that he rejects normativity as he largely sees through the façade of "normal." Normality has failed him as his mother committed suicide, his backwoods stepfather sexually abused him, the government put him in prison (as opposed to giving assistance) and for much of the movie, he has no clue who/where his father really is. Toby is many things, but from existing on the borderlines, the margins of society for so long, normal is not and never will be one of those things. Instead, he is very open to trying things outside the norm, trying on different identities per se, to see what fits right. He is attracted to transgressive environments as they allow him the fluidity in which to explore himself.

For example, Toby is drawn to drugs of all kinds. It is likely the "frog" the policed officer mentions that he got caught stealing, actually is an allusion to a toad, which if harvested properly, can produce the powerful hallucinogen, DMT. The reference to the frog isn't explored more in the film, but audiences are aware that he leaves New York with a baggie of white/light brown powder and although not explicitly

confirmed in the film, the screen asserts that the drug is indeed heroin). When he uses the substance, he snorts (bumps) it, rather than shooting up. This observation is no small distinction as it indicates a few things about his heroin use: a) such use suggests a fairly new user for this to have the effect it does and b) he less likely to be hard-core addicted than if he were consuming it intravenously. Thus, describing him as a junkie would be inaccurate because he doesn't appear to have a debilitating addiction but rather, uses drugs in times of stress as a form of escapism.

Indeed, Toby tells Bree when they first meet that he has dreams and that “junkies live only for the day.” It's clear early on that Toby's not stupid, just a little reckless with his life in search for something better than what he's experienced. In the time span before the film's occurrence, it appears that he set his goals low because he has no good support systems or role models. As the film progresses, however, Toby's drug preference declines in severity, opting for marijuana, tobacco, and/or alcohol. By the time he reaches the west coast, Toby is able to discard his partially full baggie of heroin with no remorse; presumably with Bree's influence, he quits what could have easily kill his dreams. Nonetheless, his willingness to experiment with different substances exemplifies his desire to transgress boundaries of what is “normal.” It is quite rare for audience see a depiction of a character's ability to negotiate their drug use so purposefully, particularly one so young.

Toby's fluidity extends beyond his drug use, spreading into many aspects of his identity. For example, his sexuality is queer, if not in desire, then surely in behavior. When working as a prostitute he, presumably, always solicits male clients (although this may have more to do with market rather than preference). For example, early into their journey, Toby even offers his services to Bree, perhaps in an attempt to repay her for helping him. Toby, wearing only underwear, stretches out on one of the hotel beds and waits for Bree to come out from the bathroom, sabotaging her with a seductive pose and well-practiced look of desire. His behavior and attitude contrasts with the action figure toy that rests on the bedframe, which symbolically shows how Toby, early on, is in a state of limbo between childhood and adulthood. When she

comes out of the bathroom Bree is shocked, not titillated and asks him if he has any pajamas. When he responds that he doesn't, she suggests he should get some and covers her eyes with a sleeping mask.

The next morning, she claps her hands to wake Toby up, clearly having been up for some time, judging by her made-up appearance. Groggy, he calls her "weird" and audiences can see Bree's face fall as she has to reassure herself of her femininity, checking her visage in the mirror, poking at herself, micro-managing any appearance or mannerism that could potentially reveal her biological sex. Ironically Toby- who has no interest in being normal- is the person who's opinion Bree holds in highest regard when it comes to how normal or "weird" she looks. Toby is the first person (other than her therapist) with whom Bree has substantial contact so his negative opinions greatly wound her. Conversely, his approval and considerate gestures make her elated and proud.

But depictions of Toby's exploration of his sexuality do not end there. Later with the brief scene in the diner where a girl around his age comes up and starts kissing him, Toby's interest in women (and thus his sexual queerness) is confirmed. Lastly, in Bree's parents house, Toby makes a final attempt to seduce Bree, knowing at the time of her transsexual pre-surgery status, marking a wiliness to cross boundaries of the gender binary. Though he never identifies as bisexual or pansexual, audiences can piece together his queer sexuality, despite his (seemingly) straight white male appearance. It becomes obvious, then that there is more going on with his inner identity conflicts than a system of labels can accurately pin down.

Toby's fluidity and openness doesn't end with his sexuality. When they arrive in Dallas and Mary Ellen opens the door to the first meeting of the "Gender Pride President's Day Weekend Caribbean Cruise Planning Committee," Bree is mortified, fearful that Toby will learn that she's a transsexual in "stealth" mode. Instead, Toby surprises Bree (and audiences) with his curiosity and willingness to venture into unknown environments. Toby tells her not to be so uptight and surprisingly, he joins the festivities as if he were a long-time friend. In that small living room, Bree sees his eyes opened to a world of vaginal dilators, discussions about surgery, and falling in love post-op. David, one of the few FtM transsexuals in the room, particularly interests Toby. David tells him, "We're not gender-challenged. We're gender-gifted. ...I've been

woman and I've been man, and I know things you single sexed people can't even begin to imagine." Toby is surprised but doesn't blink an eye: "Dude, I thought you were a real guy." David responds, "We walk among you." David's comment about transsexuals "walking among" is apt at pinpointing my largest concern about how the film largely portrays transsexual identities. I shall return to this in the following section.

Toby also experiments with finding a self-image he finds pleasing. After the planning party is over, Toby goes upstairs into the guest bedroom him and Bree will share. He begins to play around with Bree's pink nightgown, holding it up to his shoulders to see how it would look on, checking his reflection in the mirror. Quite literally, Toby seems to be continually trying on different identities, looking for one that "fits."

But while he is looking at himself with Bree's pink slip, she unknowingly, opens the adjacent bathroom door wearing only her bra and girdle. Shrieking in surprise, she covers her crotch and asks Toby for her robe. Equally surprised, Toby drops her nightgown and hastily stumbles to get her robe. The two have an awkward talk about her pills being a diuretic. Toby misunderstands and Bree replies, "A diuretic. It makes you go number one, not number two. Listen, I'm sorry about those ersatz women." When he doesn't understand the word, she explains, "Ersatz. It means phony. Something pretending to be something it's not." With this small comment, Bree compensates for her own insecurity by calling the others ersatz. But Toby disagrees, saying, "I thought they were nice." Ironically, the women she calls ersatz are overwhelmingly upfront and honest with Toby about their transsexual status, even explaining the necessities and complexities of vaginal dilators! Conversely, Bree herself is unable to "come out" to Toby as transsexual.

Toby's identity search isn't limited to Bree's wardrobe: when Calvin gives him the cowboy hat and tells him it came from a warrior, Toby tries on the identifications of "masculinity," "warrior," and "Native American" ("You have a Cherokee look about you. Proud people, them Cherokee"), to see which ones feel right. His assertive search for his "real" father also suggests that he is looking for male role models to influence him.

Calvin, too, is a queer character in the sense that he becomes Bree's love interest for a short period in the film. Native American, blind in one eye, and having a troubled past, he falls short of the (white) American

macho hero in many respects. Rather, Calvin appears to be a character that's "a lover not a fighter;" nonetheless, he seems to be at peace with his masculinity, and understands Toby's defensive edge. Taking an interest by giving him the cowboy hat, he entertains Toby's fascination with being part Indian. And of course, he takes an interest in Bree, to which she responds like a schoolgirl, bashfully self-conscious around the gentlemanly Calvin. Toby, unaccustomed and jealous of their courtship, has a conversation with him, but this time doesn't 'out' his benefactor:

Toby: Dude, there's things about her she's not telling you.

Calvin: Every woman has the right to a little mystery. Dude.

Toby: Did you know she's a Jesus freak? She's probably waiting to convert you.

Calvin (looking dreamily at Bree): She can convert me anytime she wants to.

By calling her a "Jesus freak" rather than a "freak," Toby is able to circumvent her secret (it's hers to tell) but still provoke Calvin to see if he can get a reading of integrity from him. Calvin surprises Toby with his response that every woman has a right to be mysterious, and that he, too, is willing to "convert" for her, without knowing much of her history.

However, perhaps partially provoked by that short conversation with Toby, Calvin shares bits of his history with Bree before they depart in an effort to strike a relationship based upon both mystery and honesty. Calvin parts with the hope that Bree might give him a call if she came back in New Mexico. In this way, the only potential love interest of the film is displaced, left unfulfilled, remaining in the realm of possibility. As Needham writes,

A sparkle of a relationship is hinted at as a future possibility for Bree and Calvin, the latter aware of Bree's unspoken difference, but as a queer film and an independent film, and in many ways counter to the multiplex ethos, *Transamerica* does not ascribe to a stereotypical romantic closure. (61)

Though the relationship between Bree and Calvin is quite new and flirtatious, audiences do not see it developing further. With many films, the romantic plot is fulfilled on screen somehow, in various degrees of

graphicness. But in *Transamerica*, audiences aren't given that visuality, and the suspended gratification of their potential romance may be as rewarding to us as it is for Bree.

Strangely enough, the film has another moment of queering the normal, with a seemingly straight character: the Mary Kay lady at the party. Bree, thinking the woman is also transsexual, tells Mary Ellen, "That poor thing couldn't pass on a dark night at two hundred yards." In fact, Bree learns that she is biologically female, though perhaps not genetically gifted enough to fit narrow female beauty standards. This little moment pinpoints how gender is a combination of performativity, aesthetic modifications, and genetic attributes. Many people, cisgender and transgender, suffer from trying to subscribe to narrow ideals of beauty, particularly those that attempt to mimic narrow feminine ideals of beauty.

Lastly, Bree's body brings up issues of queerness at specific moments in the film, though for a larger part, Bree actively works to suppress any masculine tendencies of her body, by performing femininity and using body-shaping materials. Sometimes, these transgressions come in the form of little quips, "just going to have an innie instead of an outtie" but at other moments, audiences actually get a visuality, such as the instance where Bree accidentally reveals her penis while urinating alongside the road. I argue that this moment queers Bree's character as audiences have grown so accustomed to regarding her as female throughout the film's duration; this shot lasting a matter of seconds suddenly makes Bree's transgression more "real" in the sense that part of the body that "matters most" in terms of defining gender, ultimately is one which the public rarely sees. Such a realization of this (usually hidden) visuality calls into question the very notions of how the distinction of gender is made. However, other critics have problematized this scene. Needham explains that, "It is the spectacle of difference signified by the shocking exposure of Bree's penis and the conventional melodramatic devices that work against *Transamerica*'s status as a queer film" (63). Ultimately, Needham problematizes the sexual difference (the visuality of Bree's penis pre-op) as a spectacle of difference, but I argue that the shock value is precisely what the film needs in order to deconstruct the normativity for which Bree fights so hard. I find it also interesting that Needham interrogates the visuality of Bree's penis pre-op but doesn't have any issues with Bree's vulva post-op. If anything, *that* visuality works against the queer status of

the film because it shows body completely normalized. Perhaps the penis is only shocking because the female body is given much visual space, particularly of sexuality in film and media in ways male bodies are not; since a woman's sexualized body is used for voyeurism or consumerism purposes, the spectacle of seeing it revealed is less shocking than the object that is normally never revealed (the penis).

What I find most interesting in the case of visibility of both sets of genitalia is Bree's relationship to her body at the time of occurrence. The circumstance of the penis is one of *use*- she needs it to urinate and once the task has been completed, it's tucked shamefully and quickly back inside her girdle. Such an observation contrasts sharply with the scene in the bathtub where Bree relaxes, admiring the feminine aesthetics of her surgery. In this instance, the nature of her vulva is one of *being*, not *doing*, and particularly *being*, without being sexualized. Relaxing in the tub is a suspension in time, and though we know it is not an eternal condition, it's temporality is unknown to audiences; we don't see her pour the bath, or drain the bath: we only see her for a few extracted moments, completely *in* the moment. Although it is voyeuristic in the sense that real audiences watch this private scene, Bree is not performing for anyone.

Though this reading reinforces Bree's wholeness as a woman which ultimately normalizes her body to fit narrow standards of gender, this scene nonetheless gives a visibility of a female form whose aesthetic purpose is for her own pleasure and not the pleasure of audience members. Additionally, by visualizing the juxtaposition between both moments of nudity, the film forces audiences to understand Bree's body as once queer and now normal. Bree's assertion in the beginning at the doctor's office sums this final turn up well: "After my operation not even a gynecologist will be able to detect anything out of the ordinary about my body. I will be a woman." Indeed, by witnessing the peace Bree now has with her naked form, a body completely stripped of any *social* markers of gender (i.e. clothing, cosmetics, performances), it's clear that she has become a woman. The *becoming* (as in 'woman' and 'parent') has been a process that we've only witnessed a part, but now that she is *being* a woman, the transformation allows her to also *be* a parent. This process of becoming is one of homing, of domestication, of normality.

## Chapter 9

### Normalizing the Freak

Over and over again in the screenplay and commentary/special feature tracks on the DVD, Tucker and others discuss the difficulty of making *Transamerica*. By their accounts, Hollywood, didn't want another "trannie" movie; their response to that assumption insists that the film *isn't* a trannie film. Tucker explains in the screenplay,

I believe *Transamerica* is a movie for anyone who's ever felt different and along. For anyone who's discovered growing up is hard to do. For anyone who yearns to connect. For anyone with a crazy family. For anyone who likes to laugh For anyone who understands that through it may bring as much pain as it does joy, tearing down the barricades that fear, betrayal, and disappointment erect around our hearts is the only way to live. (XV)

Since the emphasis of the film is not on transsexual politics or a fetishization of the exotic but rather on negotiations of identity and home, the film's main interest lies in making emotional appeals to universal experience of wanting to belong. The effect normalizes Bree's character, and quite well, due to her own desperate desires to be regarded as a woman.

However, the deeply problematic rhetoric about being trapped in one's own body is foundational in the *Transamerica*. Being "trapped" focus on individual bodies as a method of solution rather than a radical assertion that the "problem" is indeed that individuals are trapped by normative, narrow constructions on what constitutes their personal gender identity.

The blanket statement of being "trapped in one's body" offers too easy an explanation for the complexity of identity and how an individual interacts with larger society. It's not simply a sound-bite of

struggle or a film's exotic subject, but rather imposes an oppressive formulation on transgender bodies of all kinds, regardless of their desire to conform through medical interventions.

While the film attempts to normalize so that transsexuality has visibility and tokenized acceptance, the movie de-politicizes a marked difference that inherently offers more transgressive and liberating potentials. One is less "trapped" by their own body (clearly, technologies of body modification continue to progress) than they are by societal transcriptions by which bodies are constituted. The trapped narrative also insinuates transsexuality as a victimizing state of identity, though the film effectively queers such rhetoric with Bree's strong sense of character; it is only through feedback from the outside world do we ever see Bree's insecurity rise out. Additionally as Cowan explains,

The demand that one cross properly – as fully as possible – is arguably connected to the homophobic fear of homosexual coupling and, in particular, to the prohibition of same-sex marriages, as both Sandland (2005) and Sharpe (2002) have suggested. (250)

The small interaction with Calvin clears up any questions audiences may have about Bree's sexuality. Thus, her sexuality is normalized to better fit within the heterosexual framework. Indeed, these moments act to integrate Bree into society, to situate her in politics of normalization. In the book, *The Trouble with Normal*, Michael Warner writes: "Political groups that mediate between queers and normal find that power lies almost exclusively on the normal side. The more you are willing to articulate political issues in a way that plays to a normal audience, the more success you are likely to have" (44). While Bree is not interested necessarily in the political groups that Warner mentions, the process of normalizing herself nonetheless acquires the social/political "perks" of being considered normal. With this process, the film helps to further queer those that do not function within normative constructions of gender or sexuality.

*Transamerica* positions transsexuality as a phenomenon that exists separately from the umbrella of transgender identities. In reality, many trans people have no desire to complete a series of costly surgeries in order to normalize their bodies so that others feel comfortable. Some will not even take hormones, as they

understand their transgression as a mental rather than physical state of being or they already have a physicality that genetically lends itself to gender bending (Cowan 249). Still others do not want to be boxed in by rigid categories of the gender binary, preferring to exist outside or in-between such as two-spirit people. Obviously, *Transamerica* cannot possibly address all the various trans ways of being, but it is curious that Bree's character is perhaps one of the most normalized ideals of transsexuality. Her desire to fit inside the binary as female further helps to integrate her performance.

Less radical to be sure, Bree is a representation of the transsexuals who *do* feel "trapped" in their own body and desperately want to be "normal," fitting into their desired position of the gender binary (male or female). Such a move might seem oppressive to some, but others find comfort in performing within the hierarchical order of gender. Presenting as their desired gender and being fully regarded as such provides a greater sense of security and belongingness in various social spheres.

Bree's desire and push for surgery hopes for a life no longer "in stealth" but rather an existence in the world where no one questions her femininity. This desire is so strong that it influences her tastes in clothing, cosmetics, patterns of movement, and interests, such as Christianity. When she has a decision to make, she ventures on the side of traditional and conservative, despite being cultured through various educational interests such as French and anthropology. In her article, "We Walk Among You": Trans Identity Politics Goes to the Movies," Sharon Cowan discusses this conundrum:

Bree identifies as a feminine, heterosexual, vaguely religious, and, in most senses (other than her transsexuality), conventional, even traditional, "regular" woman. In other words, in so far as she identifies in these ways, she plays by the rules of the heteronormative sex/gender game. This, then, is what Hines would describe as a call for citizenship rather than a move towards transgression. (108)

Indeed, Cowan's observation of Bree astutely demonstrates the largest issue with categorizing this film as a queer film. Bree's transsexuality plays it safe in every way she can, demanding recognition as a citizen. While individual personal choices should absolutely be respected, the depiction enforces the idea that something is

“wrong” with her and now that it has been “fixed.” Only then, can she move into full citizenship, particularly if she takes on normative roles of parenting. This highly normalized, sanitized image of a transsexual helps to make Bree’s character more relatable, and thus, more likable, which is extremely important to the vision of the film. Bree’s transsexuality is a movement to make the freaky gendered Other more palpable to mainstream audiences.

Likewise, *Transamerica* uses intertext in order to appeal to the reliability of these two characters. For example there is a scene where Toby teaches Bree about the gay subtext in *The Lord of the Rings* (another travel story). Such an allusion appeals to many movie-goers, particularly with the success of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. By integrating snippets of popular culture, Tucker reaffirms the road movie genre at the same time the gesture allows the characters to inhabit the same reality as the audience.

The religious subtext throughout the film, particularly helps to normalize any transgressions of Bree. By taking hold of Christian indoctrination in the beginning of the film, initially as a cover, it allows Bree to negotiate her transsexuality through familiar American rhetoric. As they travel cross-country, they pass a church with the sign, “Welcome All God’s Creatures: Thieves, Liars, Gossips, Bigots, Adulterers, Deviants, Children.” The message overwhelmingly is, despite any worldly sins, everyone is welcome in that house of God. Later in the film, when Bree likens herself to Jesus in the sense that she, too, has to suffer and be reborn, she makes a huge appeal to reconsidering the abnormality of her condition; after all, we all must go through transformations to fulfill even the most traditional, conservative life transitions, such as the child to adult to parent sequence.

Indeed, normativity more than the queerness is emphasized in *Transamerica*, for the purpose of appealing to a wider audience, in order to expand the borders of acceptance to include people like Bree.

Cowen confirms:

*Transamerica* is in many ways the more popular, successful, and mainstream movie, and, in watching it, the (implicitly non- trans) viewer of the Hollywood mainstream movie is invited to witness that while transsexual people face

hardship and discrimination they are people “just like everyone else,” who deserve socio-political and cultural acceptance. (109)

Tucker and various members of the cast assert that the film is not a “trannie” movie, but rather a movie based on characters going through a tough part of their journey to understanding who they are in terms of identity and family (home). In many ways, there is nothing wrong with this desire; everyone has a right to make their own decisions. Surely, a sense of belonging is often required to feel “at home” in one’s own skin.

## Chapter 10

### Conclusions

In terms of comparative analysis, the *The Business of Fancydancing* and *Transamerica* dynamically compliment and contrast with each other. In this final section, I want to address why I selected these particular texts, and provide some concluding remarks. Primarily, my main desire was to work with texts that typically would receive little to no attention, due to the marginalization of the stories that they tell. Specifically, I was drawn to anti-canonical pieces (both in form and content) that nonetheless reflected upon issues of coming-of-age and identity development in ways that engage the politics and epistemologies of identity from very different positions. I continue to be fascinated that (largely) a mental construction, identity manifests on a wide spectrum of human expression in the physical world. By pairing these two films together, it becomes possible to see some of the tensions that have evolved due to increasing intersectionality of an individual and an ever increasing need to interact within larger communities, particularly communities in which the individual is invested such as “family:” in the case of *The Business of Fancydancing*, the rez community and in the case of *Transamerica*, the support system of (certain accepting) blood kin and other positive relations (Margaret).

For reasons now obvious, these films have many similarities. For example, they are both coming-of-age and journey movies and subsequently both are interested in the packing and unpacking conflated terms of identity. They raise questions of portability between one life transition and another, particularly because each character’s journey is rife with past struggle; each time characters encounter their past, insecurities, fears, and traumas resurface. Both of them deal with untraditional queer characters whose stories normally would not be told in the medium of film, but they do so in ways that lay claim to an American identity. *Transamerica* asserts this not only in the title of the film but the very core message of the transformative journey depicted, literally through the American landscapes. *The Business of Fancydancing* makes claim to the American

identity through a repatriation of the historical and contemporary American identity stories; the juxtaposition between Seymour's and Alexie's storytelling highlights conflicting desires in the business of writing and between dancing white and dancing Indian. Both films also depict strong identities undergoing extreme developments and evolutions. Additionally, both utilize humor as a tool to dispel heavy topics or uncomfortable situations, an effective strategy for reducing the distance between self and other.

Indeed, the list could go on about their similarities, but what is most fascinating is to consider how although the films engage in similar questions of identity, they end up being very different films with drastically different messages. The biggest difference visually is the style in which they are created: Alexie's film intentionally forces audiences to become hyperaware of the camera, aware of the transparent construction of the film, and subsequently the constructing internal stories of Seymour's character and ghostwriting. The pacing of the film is created through a series of jagged scenes, in no temporal order that, acting instead as points on a web of a bigger picture; the effect is disquieting and as Youngberg asserts, the multiple codes in the film make it hard for many audiences to pick up on *all* the nuances. Thus, due to vision of the film, it would be very difficult to effectively discuss this film without deconstructing the fissures Alexie offers. His goal isn't to provide any distinct answers, but rather to develop an environment where identities aren't conceptualized as fixed notions.

Tucker's project, however, wants the camera to disappear, in the sense that the film desires audiences to see Bree and Toby as American people, not actors playing characters. Time is very linear and traditional in format, insofar that each scene leads into the next. As each scene furthers the story in a least one way. it puts audiences at ease because they know what to expect in terms of form. Thus, the vision is one of intense character closeness, not a transparency of how the story and film is formed.

What's most fascinating to me is how both films take a drastically different approach to depicting identities that are split and searching for meaning, that is searching for belonging and home. It's particularly important how to consider how both are reacting to contemporary forces that have altered and complicated identity development. With high divorce rates, multiracial births, increased globalization, colonialization, and

identity questions raised by the civil rights movements (color, gender, class, queer, etc.) of the 1970s (among other historically specific moments), identity is no longer one or two things for most people; rather, it is a whole web of intersectionality that forces social positions upon bodies with and against their will. These films suggest how we are still negotiating the ways in which we understand identity. They desire to expand problematic constructions and offer theory complex enough to accurately articulate what constitutes the lived experiences of identity markers.

*Transamerica* has a “feel good” liberal warmness to it that appeals to many progressive thinkers; with a clear problem in the beginning, and a complete solution at the end. By getting so close to the characters and making universal appeals around love and parenthood, *Transamerica* wedges Bree’s transsexuality into safe borders of heteronormative, visually standardized frameworks; though Bree finds peace in this endeavor, it nonetheless only comes with gained acceptance of the exterior community. Thus, although Bree is strong as an individual, the film displays how important it is for human identities to feel like they belong. *The Business of Fancydancing*, however, displays how inner conflict and community desire do not always overlap neatly. Instead, it focuses on the fissures, the disjuncture between parts of one’s identity that make it difficult, perhaps impossible for some, like Seymour, to feel truly complete. In that film, the feelings of displacement come from community desires conflicting with an individual’s assessment of their place. Ironically, those troubles come from Seymour’s intense desire to be part of normative white culture, a community that will only accept him in his tokenized form. But as Native American and two spirit, he cannot fully accept his role in the ethnic epistemology of ignorance he helps to create. It’s also important to note that *The Business of Fancydancing* end on a moment, not a conclusion the way *Transamerica* does: although Seymour is back in Seattle next to his white boyfriend, he is in a moment of limbo, a moment of the present that heavily weighs the past and gives no indication of futurity. Alexie’s answer to the question is that there is no one “answer,” only things that are lost and gained in the negotiation of self.

The film’s difference in how they speak to audiences reveals their position in respect to the visibility of the identities they explore. *Transamerica*’s focus depends on normalizing “freaky” identities; in this desire,

it risks being categorized in rigid constructions that inherently subordinate that identity; the “born in the wrong body” exemplifies problematic rhetoric that works to oppress an individual as much as it acknowledges them. As with beauty norms, such pervasive rhetoric can dynamically alter an individual’s self-perspective through the internalization of rhetoric based upon shame and conformity. And as Cowan aptly points out:

People across the world who identify as trans are at risk of discrimination, violence, and death...In this sense, issues pertaining to discrimination, abuse, violence, poverty, and access to work and healthcare are fundamental to the daily lives of trans people in a way that, arguably, theoretical musings on identity are not. (95-6)

*Transamerica*’s vision, even though Bree’s character is lower-class, doesn’t focus on anything that does not have an easy resolution. Instead, the film focuses more on desire that constitute family and parenthood. This single-issue framework simply ignores the complexity and everyday challenges of transgender individuals—thus, the film reads similarly to the “It Gets Better” project. It domesticates the queer to be palpable to those that do not identify as queer, flattening the complexity and urgency of other trans identities. The benefit of domestication, however, is the comfort of normalization, but it comes at a great risk of losing a radical queerness; to be queer, one must be defined in contradictory relation to the norm. To normalize transsexual identities is to impose a sort of violence on the very core insinuations of the identity. At the same time, I cannot remain too critical as everyone has the right to express themselves however they please- with or against normative systems; the critique only exists if such choices and representations inhibit the agency of others.

*The Business of Fancydancing*, however, warns that checking any label on the box that marks an identity, create assumptions too rigid for an individual’s dynamic identity and positionality. Drawn from a more pessimistic frame, Alexie is acutely aware of the conversations surrounding his subject matter, and he creates “talking heads” for stereotypical positions. By focusing on multiple forms, various temporalities and

the paradoxes brought together, *The Business of Fancydancing* questions the very concept of identity, both as an individual as well as a community-based construction. Terms of identity can be helpful to help describe and make sense of lived complexity, but ultimately, identity politics fail at representing the real completely. With so many entangled influences, the very substance of identity becomes problematized: simultaneously being claimed by individuals in attempt of understanding one's social place in the world, claimed for political purposes. For Alexie, ruptures and discontinuity, as opposed to 'wholeness' as emphasized in *Transamerica*, formulate identity.

Alexie uses strategies that invite audiences to read the film in particular ways. His consciousness in the use of his own intertext and auto-authorship reflectivity directs audience members to consider the multiple perspectives around Native American writers, the representations in their work, and the conversations that occur as a result of their writing. Alexie invokes a sense of fluidity between different worlds: between the "real" world and the "film" world, between "real" people and characters, between texts, between authors, between different mediums of expression. The film does not presuppose that it has all the right answers. The plot remains fragmented as the audience is never given the false sense of linear place nor a concrete space to feel comfortable. Instead, Alexie plays with how an individual's past continually influences their present and future identities. Alexie's creation suggests that individual perspective remains intrinsically fragmented, negotiating around agency and interpersonal constraint specific to one's unique life experiences. His focus emphasizes the process of negotiating conflicting identities rather than depicting them as fixed.

Alexie also negotiates the difference between Native American and mainstream American fiction. Typical canonical Western novels such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Moby Dick*, and *The Great Gatsby* are centered on the journey or discovery of the main character. William Bevis, in his article "Native American Novels," describes such novels as follows, "The individual advances, sometimes at all costs, with little or no regard for family, society, past or place. The individual is the ultimate reality, hence individual consciousness is the medium, repository, and arbiter of knowledge" (28). Bevis sees a contrast with the typical Native American prose where the main character, "recoils from a white world in which the mobile

Indian individual finds no meaning and, as if by instinct, comes home... This “homing” cannot be judged by white standards of individuality; it must be read in the tribal context” (28). Alexie complicates such normative constructions in both canons, suggesting the choice between individual and community, between home and abroad, and between identities, are not selected simply. Rather his film welds an incredibly strong consciousness on the complexities of the border spaces: between white and Indian, between author and work, between sexualities and other life choices. Alexie’s film leaves us with the suggestion, however, that without balance, without coming to terms with all one’s intersection identities, life remains fracture, paradoxical, and incomplete.

The only overarching universalism I can make about identity is that it will only increase in complexity in its continual status of change; each film attempts to negotiate such identities in an ever compartmentalized, politically correct world that makes assumption of identity based upon label rigidity. However, everything that we do as humans is temporal. Even though we define meaning, particularly identity that is based upon the concept of “forever” (ie: marriage is forever), we aren’t infinite beings having a temporal experience. Instead, we are temporal beings that have infinite capabilities of fluidly, experiencing ever-changing conditions, both in terms of progression (self actualization, identity, belongingness) and degradation (aging, death, need). By giving visibility to these tensions and complicating contemporary epistemologies of identity politics, each film effectively shows the ruptures create an environment where discoveries also come with losses.

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## Reva Baylets

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### Education

|  |             |
|--|-------------|
| The Pennsylvania State University, University Park PA    | 2008-2013   |
| •Master of Arts in Comparative Literature                |             |
| •Bachelor of Arts in Comparative Literature              |             |
| •Bachelor of Arts in Women's Studies                     |             |
| •Minors in English, French, Sexuality and Gender Studies |             |
| •Excellence in Communication Certificate                 |             |
| Université Laval, Québec, Canada                         | Summer 2012 |
| •6wk study abroad: French language immersion experience  |             |

### Honors

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society               | 2012-2013 |
| Triota Women's Studies Honor Society       | 2012-2013 |
| Schreyer Honors College                    | 2009-2013 |
| Paterno Fellows Program (inaugural member) | 2008-2013 |
| Dean's List (all semesters)                | 2008-2013 |

### Professional Conference Presentations

|  |             |
|--|-------------|
| American Comparative Literature Association Toronto, Canada  | Spring 2013 |
| •Paper: "Discovery and Loss: Intersections of Identity & Home in the Films <i>The Business of Fancydancing</i> and <i>Transamerica</i> " |             |
| National Women's Studies Association (NWSA): Oakland, CA   | Fall 2012   |
| •Paper: "Rethinking Rigidity: Fluid Genders, Liquid Identities"  |             |
| PSU Women's Studies Graduate Organization State College, PA  | Spring 2012 |
| •Paper: "Rethinking Rigidity: Fluid Genders, Liquid Identities"  |             |

### Academic Memberships

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| American Comparative Literature Association | 2013      |
| National Women's Studies Association        | 2012      |
| Phi Beta Kappa National Honor Society       | 2012-2013 |

### Languages

English- advanced communications (native language)  
French- proficient communications (32.0 college credits)

### Publications

"The Erotic Compass." *Agora Publication*. Pub. 006. April 2011. Penn State.  
"Cutting Consent." *Agora Publication*. Pub. 003. November 2010. Penn State.

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## Professional Experience

- Teaching Assistant for Dr. Jonathan Abel Fall 2012
- Aided professor in teaching CMLIT 105 Literary Humor (110 students)
  - Taught special topics: “Humor in Sherman Alexie” and “Theories of Humor and Memes”
  - Created content for I-clicker quizzes and online midterms
  - Graded papers and extra credit assignments/maintained online grade book
  - Held office hours for students and answered emails promptly
- Team teacher in WMNST 364: Black and White Sexuality Spring 2011
- Requirement to engage 40 students focusing on the intersectionality of race and sexuality for a three hour class period
- Lecturer on Feminist literary theory ENGL 30H: Honors English Fall 2010
- Requirement for ENGL/WMNST 462H: Reading Black, Reading Feminist
  - Lectured and discussed material with 30 students for a one hour class
- Class facilitator in WMNST 401: Research and Pedagogy Fall 2010
- Requirement to serve as ‘expert’ on the theory surrounding queer pedagogy for a three hour class (15 students)

## Leadership and Volunteer Activities

- Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society 2012
- Secretary
- AGORA Liberal Arts Publication 2011-2012
- Women’s Studies Department Head, Editor, and Writer
- National Association of Women’s Studies Fall 2011
- Atlanta Conference Attendee
- CMLIT Grad Student Travel Fund Committee Fall 2011
- Committee member to distribute scholarship funding among applicants
- Academic Decathlon, Penns Valley Area High School Fall 2010
- Volunteer Judge (Interviewing)
- Centre County Women’s Resource Center 5k Fall 2010
- Volunteer fundraiser
- CAS 100 Civic Engagement Public Speaking Contest Fall 2008
- Class-selected representative speaker

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## Awards, Grants, and Scholarships

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|--|-------------|
| CMLIT Graduate Assistantship Tuition Grant               | Spring 2013 |
| Custard-Horton/Graduate School Grant for ACLA Conference | Spring 2013 |
| Custard-Horton/Graduate School Grant for NWSA Conference | Fall 2012   |
| Schreyer Honors College Funding for NSWA Conference      | Fall 2012   |
| Liberal Arts Enrichment Award for NWSA Conference        | Fall 2012   |
| WMNST Departmental Funding for NWSA Conference           | Fall 2012   |
| Commission for Woman Funding NWSA Conference             | Fall 2012   |
| Ellen Miller Foster Trustee Scholarship                  | 2012-2013   |
| Penn State Academic Grant                                | 2012-2013   |
| CMLIT Graduate Assistantship Tuition Grant               | Fall 2012   |
| Joanne W. Haskell Honors Scholarship                     | Fall 2012   |
| Paterno Fellow: Mckeon Director's Fund                   | Summer 2012 |
| Schreyer Honors College Study Abroad Award               | Summer 2012 |
| Global Programs Study Abroad Scholarship                 | Summer 2012 |
| Laura Richardson Whitaker Women's Studies Award          | Spring 2012 |
| Strumpf Trustee Scholarship                              | 2011-2012   |
| Yoskowitz Honors Scholarship                             | 2011-2012   |
| Yoskowitz Honors Scholarship                             | Spring 2011 |
| Strumpf Trustee Scholarship                              | 2010-2011   |
| Penn State Academic Grant                                | 2010-2011   |
| Mimi Barash Coppersmith Women's Studies Scholarship      | 2010-2011   |
| Penn State University Trustee Scholarship                | 2009-2010   |
| Penn State Academic Competitiveness Grant                | 2009-2010   |
| Penn State University Trustee Scholarship                | 2008-2009   |
| Penn State Academic Competitiveness Grant                | 2008-2009   |

## Research Interests

Inherently interdisciplinary, my research often critically combines feminist theory with comparative literary analysis. Areas of great interest to me include feminist pedagogy, queer theory, culture studies and the intersectionality of identity (particularly gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity). I typically work with marginalized texts.