

Pose and HIV/AIDS

The Creation of a Trans-of-Color Past

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Abstract This article examines how the television series *Pose* (2018–) represents queer and trans people of color living with HIV/AIDS at the height of the crisis in 1987. While the series portrays an important part of transgender history, it also positions the AIDS crisis as something that is done and part of America’s past. Despite the fact that rates of HIV infection remain at epidemic rates for trans women of color, *Pose*, like many other mainstream media representations, suggests that the AIDS crisis ended in 1995. The series brings trans women of color’s experiences to a record number of viewers, but that representation comes with a certain cost—the cost of historicization.

Keywords *Pose*, HIV/AIDS

FX’s *Pose* (2018–) takes place in 1987 New York City and follows the ballroom culture scene made up of black and Latinx queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming self-created families. The pilot episode begins with lead character Blanca (MJ Rodriguez) learning of her HIV+ status. Her status propels the narrative forward, as she seeks to create a house and a ballroom legacy to leave behind after her eventual death. Blanca works through her diagnosis with friend and ballroom emcee Pray Tell (Billy Porter), and they bond through their shared HIV+ status. The balls (fig. 1) become a way to celebrate the life they have left and to create an impact on the ballroom’s children, who will carry on their history. The series itself seeks to give its audience a lesson on AIDS crisis history. Discussing the necessity of intersectional representations of people living with HIV, Elijah McKinnon states, “*Pose* is a very important period piece that showcases the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on Black and brown LGBTQ-identified people in the ballroom community” (Feagins 2018). Despite the series’s importance for teaching audiences about trans history, McKinnon’s positioning of *Pose* as a period piece makes me wonder about the effects of making the AIDS crisis historical. When mainstream media has only one representation of trans women of color living with HIV, it is dangerous to put that representation in the past.



Figure 1. Angel (Indya Moore) performs in a ball as part of Blanca's (MJ Rodriguez) house for the royalty category in *Pose*.

Especially in light of recent 1980s nostalgia television series, such as *Glow* (Liz Flahive and Carly Mensch, 2017–) and *The Deuce* (George Pelecanos and David Simon, 2018–19), making trans HIV+ women part of a media trend reduces their very real existence in our present historical moment. When trans women, and trans women of color specifically, are continually left out of contemporary conversations about HIV/AIDS, representing their stories as past serves to further erase their need for treatment and activism in the present.

The series works to tell a history of HIV+ members of the ball community as not only involved in their self-fashioned community but also involved in broader queer politics. As Blanca's and Pray Tell's conditions worsen, Nurse Judy (Sandra Bernhard) encourages them to get involved with AIDS activism. In season 2, the series recreates the 1989 die-in at St. Patrick's Cathedral (set in 1990 in *Pose*'s diegetic world), which protested Cardinal John O'Connor's visit. O'Connor spoke out against the use of condoms at the height of the epidemic, an act demonstrating the Catholic Church's condemnation of the queer community. Pray Tell and Blanca encourage Blanca's house children—Angel (Indya Moore) and Damon (Ryan Jammal Swain)—to take part in the event and use their bodies and voices to support the queer community. When most historical narratives of the AIDS crisis focus on cisgender white gay men, putting trans women of color in this iconic moment of AIDS activism history is a radical gesture. Moreover, rather than write trans women out of this historical event, as accounts of events like Stonewall tend to do, this moment asserts that trans women were there putting their bodies on the line.¹

Since the beginning of the AIDS crisis, mainstream film and television have rarely been able to capture the activism and experiences of affected marginalized

communities. While New Queer Cinema filmmakers responded to the AIDS crisis with politically and aesthetically challenging films, these films rarely reached mainstream audiences.² Keegan argues that although the films were produced two decades apart, *Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, 1993) and *Dallas Buyers Club* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2013) represent the only mainstream depictions of HIV/AIDS, both of which troublingly dequeen the AIDS crisis. *Philadelphia* features a straight actor (Tom Hanks) playing a gay man, whereas *Dallas Buyers Club* rewrites the Ron Woodruff story to feature a straight man who turns HIV/AIDS treatment into a business.³ The film sidelines queer AIDS crisis activists who demanded HIV/AIDS research and treatment in order to portray Woodruff (Matthew McConaughey) as the Texan hero of the AIDS crisis. The only queer character shown in the film is Rayon (Jared Leto), a trans woman who becomes Woodruff's business partner. Not only is Rayon played by a cis male actor, but she is also frequently referred to as "he" throughout the film, undermining her status as a trans woman in the film.⁴ Keegan uses Sarah Schulman's theory of aesthetic gentrification, along with the concept of disruptive innovation, to claim that queer and trans audiences are willing to accept mainstream representations of queerness, even if that means they come at a lower quality than independent productions produced by queer and trans filmmakers. Mainstream distribution, unfortunately, asks producers to consider what types of representation can be monetized, and that consideration leads to representations of queerness that do not challenge dominant culture's understandings of gender and sexuality.⁵ Keegan (2016: 52) states, "Much like the rapidly gentrifying landscapes of New York City, Seattle, and San Francisco, these films are populated by white, bourgeois, straight, and cisgender bodies that then come to colonise the aesthetic spaces of the LTQB cinematic archive as its representational subjects." I would add to Keegan's analysis Schulman's (2012) observation that most Americans believed the AIDS crisis had ended by 2001. AIDS crisis history becomes open to aesthetic gentrification because of the dominant culture's perceived temporal and affective distance from it. Put another way, when the AIDS crisis is assumed to be over, representations of HIV+ bodies become easier for film and television producers to monetize.

By positioning trans women of color's activism in the past, *Pose* suggests that trans women and the queer community no longer have something to protest. Recreations of these activist demonstrations seem to evoke a sense of longing for AIDS protest, a moment when the queer community was politically energized. This longing suggests that now is not a time for such protest when, in fact, many chapters of ACT UP are still active and thriving. The NYC chapter of ACT UP recently demonstrated (fig. 2) at the Whitney's exhibition of David Wojnarowicz's work, titled *History Keeps Me Awake at Night*. The chapter protested the exhibition's historicization of the AIDS crisis. More specifically, activists criticized the



Figure 2. ACT UP members stand in front of the exhibition's queer activist AIDS crisis media with information about current issues related to HIV/AIDS, including continued stigmatization and criminalization. Photograph by Michelle Wild.

way that the exhibition presented the AIDS crisis as something that is done and something that we can look back on as an object of study. While celebrating Wojnarowicz's legacy, the exhibition's placards and guided tours suggested that the AIDS crisis ended with his art production when he died of AIDS-related complications in 1992. This pastness, however, is not a reality, or at least the AIDS crisis is not a past for many marginalized members of the American population. ACT UP's nine weeks of demonstrations silently recaptioned Wojnarowicz's work by offering the public excerpts from current HIV/AIDS news media. For instance, ACT UP's (2018) alternative caption for the piece *Americans Can't Deal with Death* (1990) reads:

A transgender Honduran woman died in ICE custody last Friday after coming to the US as part of a caravan of Central American migrants, including several dozen other transgender women fleeing persecution in their respective countries. Roxana Hernández reportedly died from HIV-related complications following an alleged five-day detention in what's known by immigrant rights groups as the "ice box"—ICE detention facilities notorious for their freezing temperatures.

The image, here, of a transgender Honduran woman dying in an "ice box" suggests the fate of HIV+ trans women of color in the United States; cast outside the

dominant culture's field of vision, they are left in a metaphorical box to suffer alone. While this placard shares a compelling anecdote about HIV+ Latina trans women's vulnerability, the Whitney protest featured an overwhelming focus on queer black men's epidemic rates of infection. Without direct attention to the equally (if not more so) alarming rates of infection for black trans women, the demonstration risked repeating broader American culture's all-too-easy neglect of trans women's health.⁶ Maybe Americans cannot "deal with" death, as Wojnarowicz suggests, but they seem to have no problem accepting death when it affects undesirable members of the population.

Critics have praised *Pose* over and over again for its diversity of representation; trans actors play trans characters, and Janet Mock works in production, making her the first trans woman of color to write and direct a television episode.⁷ Moreover, out trans and HIV+ musician and writer Our Lady J serves as a writer and producer for the series. Billy Porter is the first out gay black man to win an Emmy for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Drama Series for his role in *Pose*. The possibilities opened up for queer and trans people of color in *Pose* has led critics to surmise that more opportunities for trans actors and actresses will open up in the broader media industry. During *Variety's* "Transgender Actors Roundtable" (Setoodeh 2018), Jen Richards proclaimed that we are living in a post-*Pose* world, alluding to the seismic shifts it created for trans actors and producers in Hollywood.⁸ The series has made trans women visible in new ways, including love scenes, a romance narrative, and ballroom scenes that show trans women celebrating themselves and each other. However, trans filmmakers and scholars, such as Sam Feder and Keegan, remind us that trans representation and visibility is never so simple.

HIV/AIDS activist Alex Juhasz's and trans filmmaker Sam Feder's (2016) conversation in *Jump Cut* reminds readers that visibility alone does not lead to progress. Too often, trans women are used to create a certain type of tragedy porn, a porn in which cis audiences are able to voyeuristically consume trans women's excessive suffering. Feder describes the appeal of this type of media: "Feeling bad reaffirms the audience member as a caring, ethical person. Emotional response gets the audience's attention and despair is the easiest emotion to evoke." Despair is not only the easiest emotion to evoke, but it is also the easiest emotion for the audience to experience; the audience feels bad for suffering trans women, but they do not have to feel implicated in that suffering. *Pose*, in many ways, performs many of these tropes, and by setting the series in the past, viewers do not have to feel implicated in (or even acknowledge) trans women's suffering and death in the present. I would argue that *Pose* thus becomes a safe way for audiences to learn about HIV+ trans women of color. By considering these experiences as part of the past, the series lets viewers off the hook; trans women of color living with HIV in the present remain outside their field of vision.

The ways that trans women become visible in mainstream media have severe consequences for the material lives of trans people. Laura Horak (2018: 203) states, “Even when representation is ‘positive,’ increased media attention to trans people correlates with higher rates of violence and political backlash. While some trans actors have new opportunities many trans women of color are at increased risk.” Trans women of color become exposed to increased rates of violence with increased media representation, and, equally importantly, their unique set of concerns is often not addressed in mainstream media. Because the dominant culture (violently) excludes trans and queer people of color, they are left to invent their own culture and community. Jen Richards (2015) explains how ballroom culture depicted in *Pose* united disenfranchised trans women of color:

Black, Latina, and Asian Pacific Islander trans women, along with some white artists and performers who came from gay male communities, found one another on city streets, in nightclubs, and at underground balls. The clear lines between what we now distinguish as transsexuals and queens didn’t exist. *Total exclusion from mainstream society*, reliance on sex work and underground economies, and the necessity of sharing limited resources put a greater emphasis on groups than on individuals. (emphasis added)

Richards’s piece predates *Pose*, and she goes on to discuss how *Paris Is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1990) represents the only portrait of queer ballroom community; and even then, she states, this portrait is produced by a cisgender director who exploited this community for her own profit. Despite many of its ethical and representational issues, *Paris Is Burning* became canonized as the best portrayal of Harlem ballroom culture, largely because it was the only one.⁹

The show’s creators speak openly about using *Paris Is Burning* as *Pose*’s source material.¹⁰ Series cocreator Steven Canals describes the series as “a history lesson” and has further talked about how Angel’s story line drew inspiration from Venus Extravaganza’s, but they changed the narrative to give trans sex workers more agency.¹¹ Agency in these terms would appear to mean not being murdered by a transphobic john, thus countering the “pathetic” trope of trans representation Julia Serano (2007) theorizes as central to dominant culture’s understanding of trans women. However, one of the main characters, Candy (Angelica Ross), is killed off in exactly that way, with her body discovered in a hotel closet. The assumption that Venus Extravaganza lacked agency aside, Canal’s explanation of *Pose* as a *Paris Is Burning* remake suggests a lack of creativity. It suggests an inability to imagine the history of Harlem’s ballroom culture outside the lens of a white cisgender lesbian filmmaker’s ethnographic lens. It additionally suggests an inability to imagine HIV+ trans women of color living in the present.

My criticisms of *Pose* presented here are less to do with its characters and story lines, many of which are groundbreaking and compelling, and more to do with the ways that mainstream media continues to position HIV/AIDS as something of the past. Treating the epidemic as a piece of history, moreover, does damage to the populations currently most vulnerable to HIV contraction. According to statistics provided by the Human Rights Campaign (n.d.), 21.6 percent of transgender women in the United States are living with HIV, and “HIV is three times more prevalent among black trans women than among white or Latina trans women.” The invention of Truvada for PrEP and developments in anti-retroviral drugs have mitigated the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS for some members of the queer community, in terms of prevention and treatment. Yet the costs of medications and required doctor appointments make them inaccessible to those who are not upper-middle-class, white, and cisgendered. Assuming that trans women, and specifically trans women of color, do have financial access to HIV prevention and treatment measures, many trans people (understandably) avoid trips to the doctor out of fear of discrimination and mistreatment. PrEP may present the end of the AIDS crisis for a lucky few, but the drug is far from the utopic cure—all it has been billed to be. The combination of this perceived utopia and the sequestering of AIDS to the past makes *Pose* doubly dangerous.

I do not intend to diminish the cultural impact of *Pose*, specifically for transgender audiences who crave representation, but I also think we need to be critical about the effects of trans media representations when there are so few. *Pose* has aired contemporaneously with other series that place HIV/AIDS in the 1980s past, including Netflix’s *Glow* and HBO’s *Deuce*. Along with Ryan Murphy’s *American Horror Story: 1984*, television right now seems to have a thing for 1980s nostalgia, which also means a nostalgia for AIDS.¹² In an interview with *Variety*, cocreator Murphy explains, “I thought [*Pose*] had a definite beginning, middle, and end.” He continues on, “This show will end in 1995; it’s going to end before AIDS drugs became available. So it really is about the rise and decimation of a world” (Framke 2019). Murphy’s commentary suggests three endings, really. Explicitly, he discusses the end of *Pose*, but he also gestures toward the end of the AIDS crisis (with the invention of drugs) and the end of Harlem’s queer ballroom community. Based on these statements, it appears the series is framed by the height of the AIDS crisis rather than the history of NYC ballrooms, which did begin long before the late 1980s. Murphy implies that members of ball culture did not survive past 1995 (fig. 3), and in doing so, he altogether ignores ballroom participants living with HIV in our present.¹³

Trans representation is always both a problem of visibility and invisibility. Representation is crucial, but the wrong kinds of representation are literally life threatening. When representations of trans women, not to mention HIV+ trans



Figure 3. Pray Tell (Billy Porter) and Blanca (MJ Rodriguez) visit Hart Island to mourn deceased friends and lovers in *Pose*.

women, are already so few, it makes the stakes for each representation that much higher. We might also recall the trans visibility dilemma Horak (2018) poses—the dilemma in which greater visibility leads to greater violence against trans women, and trans women of color in particular. I am not sure what types of trans representation Horak suggests correlate with increased violence against trans people. However, I can imagine what kinds of representations I think would lead to such violence, and representation that suggests that trans women of color are not part of our contemporary world could be one.¹⁴ At the risk of producing a paranoid reading of the series, my fear is that *Pose* may be a less objectionable representation of trans women of color for mainstream audiences because the series is set thirty years in the past.¹⁵ This temporal distance might provide a sort of safety valve for viewers who would otherwise not want to see HIV+ trans women on their prime-time channel lineup. Murphy's statement about *Pose*'s time line confirms my fear that Americans can watch and praise a series about HIV+ trans women of color, so long as they can be assured that they no longer exist.

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Notes

1. Cael M. Keegan (2016), in “History, Disrupted,” discusses how Roland Emmerich’s *Stonewall* (2015) explicitly and intentionally makes trans women of color disappear from the film’s diegetic world. Instead, the film centers the character Danny (Jeremy Irvine), a fictional cis, white gay man.
2. A short list of such films includes *Poison* (Todd Haynes, 1991), *Zero Patience* (John Greyson, 1993), *Snow Job* (Barbara Hammer, 1986), and *Edward II* (Derek Jarman, 1991).
3. Those who knew Woodruff have asserted that he was an out bisexual man.
4. In addition to Keegan, see Copier and Steinbock 2018 for a thorough analysis of trans representation, or lack thereof, in *Dallas Buyers Club*.
5. As Feder puts it, “Entering the mainstream media means you’ve become a viable commodity” (Feder and Juhasz 2016).
6. ACT UP does not discuss trans women in their exhibition guide besides this one mention. However, during their demonstration in July 2018, they excerpted from the article “Infected and Invisible: South Florida’s Housing Crunch and High HIV Rates Threaten Disaster for Its Transgender Population.” In this news piece, Marcus (2018) discusses how lack of housing for trans women has led to an increase in HIV infection, with the rate of infection at 49 percent for trans women living in the Miami area.
7. *Pose* credits Janet Mock with writing seven episodes and directing three.
8. Ramin Setoodeh (2018) hosted a roundtable of trans actors to respond to the Scarlet Johansson *Rub and Tug* controversy, in addition to sparking conversation around the increase in trans representation with actresses like Laverne Cox. The roundtable included Jen Richards, Laverne Cox, Chaz Bono, Trace Lysette, Alexandra Billings, and Brian Michael.
9. See Butler 2011 and hooks 2012 for criticisms of *Paris Is Burning*.
10. In an interview with *NPR*, Janet Mock (2019) discusses how *Paris Is Burning* was the first representation of trans women she had ever seen and inspired her writing for *Pose*. Steven Canals discusses how *Paris Is Burning* served as the series’s inspiration text in the documentary film *Queering the Script* (Gabrielle Zilkha, 2019).
11. Canals talks about Venus Extravaganza and the Angel story line parallels in *Queering the Script*.
12. We could also consider the 2018 Broadway revival of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*.
13. Ironically, current house mother of the House of LaBeija, Kia LaBeija, was contacted to consult on the series. LaBeija is HIV+ and works to raise HIV/AIDS awareness in her art and activism.
14. *Pose* is not the first series to feature a trans woman of color lead; *Orange Is the New Black* (Jenji Kohan, 2013–19) featured Sophia Buset (Laverne Cox) from the beginning of the show. The film *Tangerine* (Sean Baker, 2015) also features a number of trans women of color and their stories. However, *Pose* is the first series to feature an ensemble cast of trans women of color.
15. I am thinking specifically here of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (2002) theorization of paranoid versus reparative queer reading practices, as she outlines them in her book *Touching Feeling*. Her framework for queer paranoid readings begins with a discussion of the AIDS crisis and conspiracy theories surrounding the government’s intentional spread of the HIV virus.

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