

Trans Film and Theatre in Practice: Emerging Artists in Aotearoa Speak to Industrial Challenges and Opportunities

Paige Macintosh*

Abstract

This article summarises discussion points raised at a recent Rainbow Studies panel between trans scholars and creatives from across Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington. In discussing their work in various local film and theatre projects, trans creatives Jules Daniels, Seren Ashmore and Willem Koller—in a discussion led by Missy Molloy and Paige Macintosh—shed light on the industrial realities, opportunities and challenges that inform contemporary trans film and theatre in Aotearoa. What trends do these creatives see in emerging local trans media and what do they consider critical to contemporary depictions of gender diversity? How do their trans and genderqueer identities impact their creative practice? And what might their experiences reveal about a nascent trans culture in Aotearoa?

Keywords: Aotearoa; transgender; media; authorship; embodiment

Introduction

As trans scholarship moves beyond debates about good versus bad media representation (Keegan, 2022), opportunities emerge for researchers to attend to trans creatives' lived experiences, particularly of those living and working outside of the United States. This movement away from discussions of mainstream, cis-authored productions—which tend towards reductive and trauma-fixated transition stories—to consider more radical and affirming forms of trans media produced by trans creatives has led to a renewed interest in media authorship (Horak, 2017; Keegan, 2018; Steinbock, 2019). An emerging trans-authored category of media and performance depends upon significant contributions by trans and gender-diverse creatives—as performers, writers, directors, scholars and viewers, to name a few—to deliver and meaningfully respond to genuinely trans-authored and oriented stories. This article spotlights the experiences of early-career creatives who are part of a broader movement of interdisciplinary artists in Aotearoa/New Zealand (hereafter, Aotearoa) who are overturning cisgender storytelling conventions to assert realities and fantasies of gender diversity and nonconformity. The insights presented below summarise and contextualise discussion points raised at a November 2023 Rainbow Studies panel—Writing, Performing, and Screening Trans in Aotearoa—which featured trans scholars and creatives from across Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington.¹ Reflecting on the conversations that arose during this roundtable, which I led alongside Missy Molloy, I draw attention to the ways that trans people negotiate different media landscapes as they relate to trans and non-trans communities. By talking through their work in various local film, theatre and performance projects, trans creatives Seren Ashmore, Jules Daniels and Willem Koller shed light on the industrial realities, opportunities and challenges that inform contemporary trans film and theatre production in Aotearoa. Emerging from this roundtable exchange were several compelling questions: How do these

* **Dr Paige Macintosh** is a trans scholar based in Aotearoa/New Zealand. They hold a PhD from Te Herenga Waka | Victoria University of Wellington. Their first monograph—*Debating authenticity: Authorship, aesthetics, and embodiment in trans media*—is under contract with Edinburgh University Press and due for publication in 2025.
Email: paige.macintosh@vuw.ac.nz

¹ The original panel from which this article draws featured as part of the Rainbow Research Network's 2023 symposium: Rainbow Studies NOW.

creatives engage with mainstream media? How do their trans and genderqueer identities affect their creative practices? And finally, what might their experiences reveal about a nascent trans culture in Aotearoa?

Our roundtable provided an opportunity for early-career trans creatives to speak back to transnormative media practices and explain how their own work challenges those traditions that they inherited but do not want to sustain.² All three participants spoke with enthusiasm about genre's power to address alternative forms of trans embodiment. They also celebrated innovative approaches to coming-out narratives and expressed frustration with mainstream trans representation. Regarding media production's more practical aspects, the panellists likened their own creative processes to Fourth Cinema, an influential account of Indigenous cinema originally proposed by Aotearoa's Barry Barclay, in that they privileged a trans worldview when producing trans media. They also discussed theatre's ephemerality and the complications arising from community collaboration. While talking through these issues, they shared concerns about accessibility and the fraught power relations underpinning local film and theatrical production. Ultimately, the roundtable and its presentation of its key points reveal fundamental tensions between mainstream culture and the work these trans artists want to see and produce. Their comments suggest that, in contemporary trans-led media and performance, issues related to trans embodiment take precedence over 'trans representation' (in the most literal and reductive sense). Meanwhile, in industries dominated by cis creatives, producers and audiences, complicated power relations underscore the community's ongoing vulnerability.

Critical contexts: Debates currently occupying trans scholarship

Trans media scholarship is a continuously evolving field. Responding to emerging pop culture and media studies trends, the discipline is in constant conversation with trans media critics, audiences and creatives. This dynamic is essential to the discipline's capacity to attend to rapid changes in trans media production and reception. Screen histories of gender variance date back to film's silent era, but only in the past few decades have recognisably transgender characters emerged. Appearing initially as psychotic killers (*Dressed to Kill*—De Palma, 1980) or comic relief (*The World According to Garp*—Hill, 1982) and later as 'pathetic' (*Transamerica*—Tucker, 2005) or 'deceptive transsexuals' (*Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*—Shadyac, 1994; see Serano, 2007), mainstream trans characters evolved into preternaturally tragic figures early in the 2010s (*Dallas Buyers Club*—Vallée, 2013; see Cavalcante, 2013). This representational shift—from perpetrator to victim of screen violence—both responded and contributed to trans people's increased visibility since the so-called 'trans tipping point' (Feder & Juhasz, 2016; Steinmetz, 2014). But most recently, the popularity of inclusive casting practices and calls for 'for us, by us' media authorship have had the greatest impact on trans media scholarship. As trans-affirmative casting became more prevalent in film and television production, arguments among scholars about the need for positive representation gave way to discussions about who has the right to produce, write and claim legitimacy for trans narratives (Macintosh, 2023).

Underpinning trans media scholars' increased attention to performance authenticity and credible authorship are concerns trans scholars raised as far back as the 1990s: that the field was not adequately invested in real trans communities, but rather in the propagation of fantasies about trans communities that originate in and reinforce cis imaginaries (Namaste, 2005; Prosser, 1998). In 1997, Jacob Hale outlined rules for scholars writing about trans subjects. In doing so, he challenged academics to interrogate their own positionality and address trans people's historic subjugation: "Don't imagine that you can write about the trope of transsexuality, the figure of the transsexual, transsexual discourse/s, or transsexual subject positions without writing about transsexual subjectivities, lives, experiences, [and] embodiments" (Hale,

² Austin H. Johnson (2016, p. 466) defines *transnormativity* as a hegemonic ideology that "structures transgender experience, identification, and narratives into a hierarchy of legitimacy dependent upon a binary medical model and its accompanying standards, regardless of individual transgender people's interest in or intention to undertake medical pathways to transition".

2009). What Hale's ground rules did not address was how research into creative industries might redress the exploitation of trans "subjectivities, lives, experiences, [and] embodiments," which is precisely the work Alexander Eastwood (2014), Laura Horak (2017), Cael Keegan (2018) and Helen Hok-Sze Leung (2014) undertook in the decades following Hale's publication. Their research foregrounds trans creatives, trans media production and trans spectators, thereby raising provocative questions about trans media-making in the twenty-first century: Is trans media work that features trans characters and/or work made by trans creatives? Can it be work that appeals to trans audiences regardless of whether it was trans-authored or includes trans characters? Considering the high level of competition in the creative industries, which also tends to be quite costly, who should be supported in making trans media? These questions turn on the thorny subject of how trans authorship claims are negotiated within inherently collaborative industries, like film, television, theatre and live performance.

Trans scholars and creatives continually wrestle with these questions; as such, this roundtable sought to reframe these debates within the national context of Aotearoa to offer new perspectives. Responding to Jay Prosser and Viviane Namaste's original demands for trans scholarship invested in trans communities, Molloy and I invited three local trans creatives to discuss their experiences as both trans media viewers and creatives. In doing so, our aim was to contribute to the debates outlined above while working towards and refining a specifically Aotearoa trans culture. While scholars such as Will Hansen (2022) have successfully illuminated trans legacies within Aotearoa's gay liberation movement, attention to the country's trans media history is in an early stage. This invisibility is no doubt linked to the conspicuous absence of trans people from the culturally dominant cinema and television of the past few decades. That said, the financial and critical successes of *Rūrangi* (Currie, 2020)—the locally produced trans film which broke new ground by foregrounding trans viewpoints and was picked up for global distribution by Hulu—demonstrated the commercial viability of state-funded trans media, thus signalling a turning point in local trans media production and reception. The independent drama follows trans activist Caz Davis (played by Elz Carrad) as he returns to his rural hometown (Rūrangi) for the first time since beginning his gender transition. The web-series-turned-feature-film modelled a radically inclusive production process, centring both trans and Indigenous voices as it grappled with issues of identity, community and environmental activism. The series and film's cultural significance was mentioned and reiterated at multiple points throughout the roundtable, with the panellists repeatedly referencing it as an aspirational text. That being the case, our conversation with Ashmore, Daniels and Koller sheds light on the specificities of trans media production in Aotearoa in the wake of a *Rūrangi*-inspired sea change, which prompted the panellists to explore the relationship between their trans identities and creative practice at greater depth. Repurposing the trans media debates outlined above to the specific national context of Aotearoa reveals rich opportunities to explore the uniquely compelling dynamic between trans communities and trans media production.

Defying trans storytelling traditions

The Writing, Performing, and Screening Trans in Aotearoa panel featured three early-career trans creatives: Jules Daniels (a non-binary trans-masc creator working in the local comedy, theatre, film and drag scenes), Seren Ashmore (a trans filmmaker working mostly in camera and art departments) and Willem Koller (a trans filmmaker interested in scriptwriting, directing and editing). At the time of the symposium, Koller had recently finished his first short film, *NEST*, which he wrote, directed and co-edited (Koller, 2023). Ashmore also contributed to the project, working as 1st Assistant Camera, art director and graphic designer. The roundtable kicked off with the panellists discussing their relationship with mainstream trans media: their first encounters with trans characters on screen and the impact these works had on the evolution of their creative practice. The discussion repeatedly mentioned frustration with work like Tom Hooper's *The Danish*

Girl (2015), which they cited as exemplary of mainstream media's problematic treatment of (and fixation on) trans femininity and its hyperbolic focus on dysphoric trans bodies (sentiments echoed by Feder and Juhasz (2016), Keegan (2016) and Straube (2020)). For Daniels, films like *The Danish Girl* "overly sexualise ... and sensationalise" trans women while simultaneously marking them as tragic figures. *The Danish Girl*'s trans protagonist is typical of the 'Indiewood' prestige films popular (and profitable) during the 2010s: Lili Elbe is a pathetic figure obsessed with feminine garments and driven by crippling gender dysphoria that ultimately leads to her death (Filippo, 2016). Daniels's commentary on the tragedy of her narrative arc echoes trans scholars' concerns with mainstream media's persistent pathologisation of trans characters. According to Keegan (2013), trans identity "has been sutured to specific forms of negative affect—rage, sorrow, wishfulness, denial"—as instruments of pathologisation and "expressions of what is imagined to be an inherently dysphoric ontology". For the likes of Lili Elbe, as depicted in Hollywood cinema, dysphoria is tantamount to self-hatred and tragedy; therefore, becomes "the defining paradigm for narrativizing gender variance" (Cavalcante, 2013, p. 88). As Daniels explained, the message trans audiences receive from mainstream media texts such as *The Danish Girl* is "I'm undesirable, I'm going to be alone and I'm going to die trying to be happy with myself."

For Koller, such disregard by the media for trans audiences is the driving force behind the problematic nature of their *misrepresentation*. By appealing primarily to cis spectators, mainstream media that delves into trans issues (by, for instance, including a trans character marooned among cisgender people) often produces content that functions primarily as 'introductions' to trans identities (thereby excluding communities that are quite familiar with them). According to Koller, this 'Trans 101' media holds little appeal for trans audiences: "I don't feel like I gain anything from stuff like that ... it's teaching the basics of transness and not very well (in the case of *The Danish Girl*)." Simply put, the sensational (and often sensationalised) allure transness holds for cis characters and audiences does not translate for viewers already immersed in trans communities and cultures. While trans viewers applauded Daniela Vega's casting in *A Fantastic Woman* (Lelio, 2017), for example, they were less excited about the character's "spectacular" depiction (Macintosh, 2023). Koller acknowledged that such media could be useful for normalising trans identities, but he was "a little bit less interested in it. It's stuff [he] wouldn't make". The panellists made little distinction between debatably well-meaning introductory texts like the Academy Award-winning Chilean film and films peddling the tragic tropes condemned by Daniels. In the case of *The Danish Girl*, the film's liberal appeal to cis audiences was the crux of its failure to land with trans viewers. Such media does not merely introduce mainstream audiences to trans people, it pedagogically employs sentimentality to evoke pity for trans characters (thus rendering them as tragic failures that shore up the comparatively successful cis identities juxtaposed with them; for example, Lili's wife Gerda in *The Danish Girl* and Ron Woodroof in Jean-Marc Vallée's 2013 film *Dallas Buyers Club*). Since sentimental pedagogy aims to generate compassion for one individual rather than inspire social change for a collective (Piontek, 2012), films like these inevitably reinforce the (transnormative) status quo. Indeed, *The Danish Girl* leaves the historical social and ideological structures that inform the film's tragedy intact, rather than interrogate the transphobia embedded within them, which remains evident in contemporary culture (Filippo, 2016).

The panellists' intense frustration with traditional media and performance formed the backdrop from which their own work emerged. This process has two stages. First, the panellists drew attention to their recognition of the absence of certain types of representation, particularly trans masculinity. *Time*'s much discussed "transgender tipping point" (Steinmetz, 2014) might have signalled a new era of trans visibility within mainstream media in the mid 2010s, but increased visibility did not herald a new era of trans liberation (Aizura et al., 2014). Visibility, in this instance, meant hyper-visibility — and increased vulnerability — for trans women in particular (Aizura, 2018). For Daniels, trans men and non-binary people's relative invisibility inspires them to introduce their own representation in a paltry field: "I really wanted to try and be that representation, to show that we could get somewhere and make it." Secondly,

Ashmore's and Koller's exasperation with mainstream media tropes—including mirror scenes, transphobic violence and psychotic trans killers—compels them to write and shoot unconventional screen narratives that undermine and reclaim elements of this problematic tradition. Despite criticising the oversaturation of coming-out stories throughout the roundtable, Koller's short film *NEST* is in many ways a surreal repurposing of this same narrative, albeit with a focus on the internal process of “coming out to yourself”. Using pregnancy horror as a metaphor “for the feeling of being forced to come to terms with something that is growing inside of you, something inexorable” (Hewison, 2023), *NEST* employs body horror to depict the emotional experience of trans self-actualisation. By emulating David Cronenberg's surrealist approach to body horror—and refusing to label any of his characters as explicitly trans—Koller subverts the trans killer/victim tropes firmly rejected by trans communities:

I would be too afraid to inflict pain on realistic trans characters because that's awful to watch and to experience. But if we get to play pretend, the funnest [sic] parts are the violence and the drama of it all.

For Koller, how filmmakers use recognisable tropes is key to repurposing them. In *NEST*, mirrors and violence “enhance the specific feeling” of being trans rather than representing actual trans experiences and the film's generic elements clarify that purpose, repurposing trans villains as a manifestation of internalised transphobia.

Koller's reliance on body horror to subvert otherwise transnormative tropes speaks to the panellists' interest in genre filmmaking as a transgressive mode of trans storytelling. For Koller:

... a lot of the feelings that are explored within the genre, disconnection from the body and the feelings surrounding that, feeling like your body is taking you places you can't control ... I just always thought that was super trans.

In terms of cinematic influences, the panellists repeatedly referenced the films of David Cronenberg and John Waters. For Koller, these filmmakers' depictions of grotesque spectacle spoke to his own trans experiences, despite neither filmmaker identifying as trans. Complicating arguments about who can write trans stories, Koller identifies a particular trans “feeling” he associates with Cronenberg's films: “To me, I think he makes super trans films ... like for me *The Fly* [Cronenberg, 1986], that's a trans guy. That is a trans masc story. That's just how I've always taken it.” Ashmore similarly associates transness with monstrosity and the posthuman when discussing his own short film *Lazy Boy* (Ashmore, 2015), arguing that the way his film's monster is “part of the machine ... his body is not fully human” is “very trans”. Both filmmakers demonstrate an affinity for horror filmmaking, despite the genre's problematic history.³ The psychotic trans killer may have emerged from this same tradition, but by turning away from literal trans representation to surreal depictions of trans embodiment, both Koller and Ashmore contribute to an emerging canon of progressive trans horror.⁴

For both filmmakers, the horror genre offers opportunities to move beyond typical transition narratives to focus on exploring trans embodiment on screen. Accordingly, horror could convey what they regard as uniquely trans experiences without betraying any weaknesses of the pitiable trans figure in *The Danish Girl*. In doing so, they reject tragedy, rooted in realistic conventions, in favour of more playful and cathartic genre storytelling. Death and violence, in the context of camp horror, can be playful and pleasurable for both performer and audience. The on-screen violence in a slasher film, for example, does not translate into a traumatic viewing experience for fans of the genre. As Koller explained, death “gets too

³This is not to say that all trans people have an affinity for body horror. One trans member of the audience expressed discomfort with the associations Koller's film made between pregnancy and monstrosity.

⁴Jane Schoenbrun's *I Saw the TV Glow* (2024) is a recent example of this type of filmmaking.

complicated when you're grounded in reality. I don't want to [get into] that. I want to play with all of the parts of film that are exciting." In Koller's view, violence is both liberating and joyful when performed within certain generic expressions, which lends it a critical function it would not otherwise perform. An emphasis on trans embodiment, rather than literal trans characters, was critical to this process of depicting trans perspectives. Koller explains that in *NEST*, "No one is a trans character; they're representing a trans feeling", although it was still important "to have trans people portray the trans feeling because obviously they understood it and could perform it better". Similarly for Ashmore, *Lazy Boy* is not textually trans but rather is inherently "trans because I am trans and the people I'm around are trans... it's a good example of the way just having trans people there brings transness to the fore." These comments revitalise debates about trans-affirmative casting. For these creatives, it was not enough to simply have trans performers play trans roles. For their creative projects to fully capture a sense of trans embodiment they needed to be immersed within trans communities. For both filmmakers, repurposing trans embodiment in their screen work is a critical tool for circumnavigating troubling tendencies they identify in mainstream trans representation.

Trans media making in Aotearoa

Underpinning these conversations about trans embodiment were questions about authorship. Koller's and Ashmore's comments assume that trans-authored media inevitably invests the work with a trans sensibility. But film, television and theatre's collaborative structure complicates this assumption—particularly in an era when mainstream cis media producers often wield trans consultants, writers and performers as markers of cultural legitimacy while withholding creative control and financial profits for themselves (Macintosh, 2023). For the roundtable panellists, the aim was not to have a single trans author but to hire trans creatives at all levels of production, a practice they model after Fourth Cinema. An Indigenous filmmaking philosophy defined by Māori filmmaker Barry Barclay and based on his own filmmaking practice, *Fourth Cinema* privileges the Indigenous gaze and the Indigenous audience. According to Barclay (1990, p. 9), Indigenous peoples were attentive to how they might "take this maverick yet fond friend of ours—the camera—into the Māori community and be confident it will act with dignity". One response was to hire as many Māori cast and crew members as possible, using every production as an opportunity to upskill within the community. This philosophy of story sovereignty appealed to the panellists, inspiring a similar 'for us, by us' movement. Daniels spotlighted the work of Barclay and Merata Mita (a Māori filmmaker and contemporary of Barclay's), comparing the way Māori stories were traditionally told "from a colonised viewpoint" to the way cis perspectives dominate mainstream trans storytelling. Daniels argued that "unless you're part of that culture, you're not going to understand" their stories. Koller explicitly acknowledged Barclay's influence on *NEST*'s production: "I was always really inspired by the way he wanted to make Māori films with as many Māori cast and crew as well." His experience working with a primarily trans production team was transformative and—according to Koller—critical to the film's success, both in terms of efficiency ("it takes so much less explaining" when they "completely understand ... visual references") and validation ("They knew the feeling I was talking about."). For Ashmore, Daniels and Koller, Māori filmmaking practices and scholarship transformed their own creative practice and distinguished Aotearoa film and theatre traditions. Moreover, by connecting their work to a wider legacy of Indigenous storytelling, the panellists demonstrated the importance of solidarity, both between and within marginalised communities.

Indigenous and trans filmmaking practices intersect in *Rurangi's* production. The show's pre-production process reflected its commitment to trans and Māori inclusivity: Fifty-nine per cent of the show's cast and crew were trans or gender diverse and the filmmakers established an advisory board of trans consultants with veto power over the production ((New Zealand International Film Festival, 2020).

The team brought Tweedie Waititi on board during the first film as a Māori consultant and hired Briar Grace-Smith as the sequel's co-director. According to writer Cole Meyers (2020), the production set up a paid internship programme for the film (funded by the New Zealand Film Commission), pairing trans interns with heads of departments to help upskill a future generation of trans filmmakers. For Meyers, "It was important that there was an opportunity for trans people to be involved in the film industry and that we plant a seed for the future talent" (New Zealand International Film Festival, 2020). The panellists read this commitment to inclusive production practices as an extension of Barclay's Fourth Cinema and as a model for them to emulate. As Koller explained, they saw what the *Rūrangi* crew was doing and thought, "That's exactly what I want." Koller's *NEST* was similarly committed to not only hiring as many trans cast and crew members as possible, but using the production as an opportunity for these creatives to learn from more experienced industry members. For Daniels, the lack of trans elders in creative fields reflects wider accessibility issues and a "real loss" to the community. They recognised *Rūrangi* as an attempt to address these gaps. Although the panellists celebrate *Rūrangi* as a turning point for local trans cinema, both in terms of its content and production, it remains one of only a few trans media productions to come out of Aotearoa since its release in 2020.

Trans theatre performance, on the other hand, offers more opportunities for these young trans creatives to practise their craft. In comparison to film and television, drag provides an immediacy that the panellists found compelling. Koller compared his experiences as a film director and drag king, explaining that film was "a very slow-moving industry" whereas drag was "the complete opposite, it's such an immediate thing, it's so interactive with the audience". Its ephemerality was both a blessing and a curse: drag can be spontaneous and reactive but lacks cinema's resilience. Koller continued, "With drag, it's much less permanent. It's there in the moment and then it's gone and that's the beauty of it." Film, on the other hand, allows trans people to "make [their] mark in history", as Daniels put it. Throughout the roundtable, the panellists compared Aotearoa's drag scene favourably to *RuPaul's Drag Race*, spotlighting the country's diverse range of performers. Wellington in particular boasts a considerable number of drag kings, as well as an 'Anti-Pageant' competition celebrating Aotearoa's top Drag Monster. These 'monstrous' performances are emblematic of the campy body horror showcased in Koller's film and a testament—according to Koller—to the work of local organisers like Amy Thurst: "There have been lots of people within the community who have really put in the mahi [work] to shift the narrative" away from more the more traditional, feminine drag featured in *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Murray, 2009–present). For Koller, takatāpui performers like The Tīwhas (a live singing Māori drag ensemble) are quintessential to Aotearoa drag. They're not "something you're gonna get anywhere else and that's incredibly valuable". For all three creatives, local drag was a rich source of creativity and community from which they could develop their own artistic practice.

Conversations around the importance and fallibility of community for locally produced trans media recurred throughout our discussion. Both film and theatre are inherently collaborative industries (Gaut, 1997). Low-budget, independent productions are even more reliant on community support. For Koller, drag culture fosters the kind of community that made his film possible: "When you're performing weekly with the same ... group of people you become very close ... What made us able to move into making the film version of *NEST* was because we ha[d] those tight-knit communities." Koller financed *NEST* through local crowdfunding site Boosted and relied heavily on the drag community for fundraising. It was this same sense of community that the panellists felt was missing from mainstream trans representation. Daniels found an "eerie loneliness" permeated films like *The Danish Girl*, which omits references to Berlin's vibrant trans culture despite being set in the city during the 1920s (Filippo, 2016). But while community support plays a critical role in these creatives' work, it came with its own set of problems. Daniels noted that transphobia and misogyny remain an issue in some parts of the drag scene and recounted some troubling

behaviour they encountered while performing.⁵ For Daniels, “You can’t separate how insular the community is”, especially when “everyone’s competing for a small amount of resources”. Lack of funding for local arts emerged as a significant concern for the panellists, reinforcing their reliance on community fundraising and material support. Like Koller, Ashmore depended on friends and classmates during *Lazy Boy*’s production. Community was, in these instances, the only means by which these creatives could counter chronic underfunding of the arts.

Industrial relations: Flaws and frustrations

The trans masculine underrepresentation panellists identified in mainstream media was in some cases replicated on the local scene, marginalisation that extended to disabled performers and people of colour. The panellists’ concerns spoke to general accessibility issues impacting trans creatives in local film, television and theatre. Trans scholarship clearly illustrates how trans groups—in particular, trans People of Colour—experience marginalisation within mainstream society and queer communities (Irving, 2008, p. 5; Stryker 2017, p. 138). Although drag is comparatively more accessible than film and television production, it requires an enormous amount of time and funding. Daniels pointed out how *RuPaul’s Drag Race* normalises expensive lace front wigs and professional costuming, thereby making the art form less accessible to younger trans performers. According to the panellists, the show celebrates a “certain style of drag”: feminine, polished and extravagant. Even the more inclusive events discussed above, such as Thurst’s Anti-Pageant, remain inaccessible to wheelchair users. As Daniels pointed out, “There is no place in Wellington that has a green room that’s accessible.” Film and television’s prohibitive costs, meanwhile, also exacerbate trans people’s marginalised status: if trans people are “more likely to be denied housing, work and healthcare” (Irving 2008, p. 40), it follows that they are less likely to have the capital to invest in film or television production. Trans creatives’ underrepresentation in local screen media is therefore an extension of their wider disenfranchisement.

Throughout the roundtable, discussions about trans productions often returned to the leadership roles and power (im)balance between cis producers and trans creatives. Ashmore, Daniels and Koller were committed to having trans workers in all levels of production, but they were particularly cognisant of trans people’s underrepresentation in leadership roles. For them, hiring trans writers, producers and directors was critical for trans media-making going forward. But Koller also acknowledged how valuable cis producers could be for inexperienced trans creatives, provided they were committed to uplifting trans voices. Koller collaborated closely with cis producer Dean Hewison on *NEST*. The two met in a film production course at Te Herenga Waka | Victoria University of Wellington, when Hewison was a lecturer and Koller a student. Hewison was both producer and mentor, providing invaluable support for the first-time filmmaker. As Koller explained:

[Hewison made the film] better because he had industry knowledge. He has a lot of experience. And completely poured himself into helping with those aspects he knew so much more about. But he sat back on anything I was more competent in and he ... made an effort to let me move into those spaces. I think that’s where we worked really well together, because we had really opposite strengths. And we respected where each other sat. I think anyone could be involved with any project, as long as they’re only doing the parts that they’re suited for. And they can actually bring something to them. I think the problem comes when they try to overstep into places where trans people should be.

⁵ Although there are many trans drag performers in Aotearoa/New Zealand, it is worth clarifying that drag and trans communities are not synonymous.

According to Koller, Hewison's professional input was always in service of Koller's vision and this contributed to the film's eventual success. But as Daniels pointed out, this is not necessarily typical of cis producers. Daniels explained that they see a lot of non-binary and women-only shows curated by cis producers that use problematic language while simultaneously trying to profit off their show's assumed progressiveness. As they put it, "It's hard when it's out of your control." Ultimately, what the panellists desired above all when working with cis creatives was accountability and the freedom to express their own artistic vision.

Our panellists' investment in media made by and for trans communities inevitably raises questions about their works' intended audience. For Ashmore, Daniels and Koller, the ideal audience for their work was always the trans community. As Koller explained, "The audience that I'm thinking about ... when I'm writing is just trans peers and trans artists I admire. I want to be in conversation with them." For *NEST*, this comes across through community in-jokes and cultural references. In online trans communities, the term 'egg crack' refers to the first stage of self-realisation for trans people: the moment they first come to terms with being trans. And in *NEST*, Mother's egg 'cracking' is the point where "she finds her strength and asserts herself and becomes really protective". Koller uses this as a metaphor for his own trans becoming, a moment he argues is recognisable to many community members. But writing for a primarily trans audience does not mean these creatives' work has no value for cis people. For Daniels, when they perform at comedy shows, they're working on the mode of: "It could be for anyone; it's not for everyone." They went on to explain that trans content can speak to universal truths: "Quintessentially we all know what it's like to be othered ... there are things that you feel being trans that are just extensions of the human experience." Moreover, everyone is impacted by gender roles "and societal expectations of those gender roles". There is an underlying tension to these responses, between the desire for their work to be shared and anxiety about losing control of its reception. Koller's reclamation of transnormative tropes, for example, might appear less transgressive when screened at a mainstream festival. But they ultimately return to a desire to share something of their own experience. Films like *NEST* and *Lazy Boy* might not be read as trans by cis audiences, but the filmmakers hope "that they feel something unique" while they watch. As Koller says, "I hope that they just feel a different feeling that they haven't felt before. That would be the coolest thing for someone that far away [from trans experiences]."

Conclusion

In her 2017 article "Tracing the history of trans and gender variant filmmakers", Laura Horak advocates re-evaluating the trans media canon. Arguing that "most writing on transgender cinema focuses on representations of trans people, rather than works made by trans people" (p. 9), Horak asks scholars to instead centre trans-authored media productions in their research. Our roundtable responds to such provocations by spotlighting trans writers, directors and performers' perspectives. Bringing Seren Ashmore, Jules Daniels and Willem Koller into conversation with trans scholarship creates opportunities to explore many of the issues currently occupying trans communities: their frustration with mainstream media, their investment in collaborative media-making practices, and their economic vulnerability. Reflecting on the conversations prompted by the Writing, Performing, and Screening Trans in Aotearoa roundtable, this article has outlined these artists' rejection—and at times subversion—of the mainstream media tropes that informed their introduction to trans screen stories. Their interest in trans embodiment in lieu of traditional transition narratives mirrors wider trans media-making trends, but their interest in Fourth Cinema speaks to the specificities of Aotearoa trans media production. Ultimately, this work reveals trans communities' need for accountability, community collaboration and financial capital in their pursuit of a local trans media tradition.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my fellow panellists Seren Ashmore, Jules Daniels, Willem Koller and Missy Molloy for their contributions to the original roundtable. Your insightful and engaging discussion made this article possible. I'm also grateful for Missy's support in bringing this panel together and providing feedback on the first draft of this article. Finally, ngā mihi nui to the fellow organisers of the Rainbow Studies NOW symposium who helped put together an incredible showcase of queer and trans research.

References

- Aizura, A. Z. (2018). *Mobile subjects: transnational imaginaries of gender reassignment*. Duke University Press.
- Aizura, A. Z., Trystan Cotten, C., Balzer, C., LaGata, M. O., Vidal-Ortiz, S. (2014). Introduction. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1(3), 308–19. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2685606>
- Ashmore, S. (Director). (2015). *Lazy Boy* [Film].
- Barclay, B. (1990). *Our own image*. Longman Paul.
- Cavalcante, A. (2013). Centering transgender identity via the textual periphery: TransAmerica and the “double work” of paratexts. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 30(2), 85–101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2012.694077>
- Cronenberg, D. (Director). (1968). *The Fly* [Film]. Brookfilms & SLM Production Group.
- Currie, M. (Director). (2020). *Rūrangi* [Film]. Autonomouse.
- De Palma, B. (Director). (1980). *Dressed to Kill* [Film]. Cinema 77/Film Group.
- Eastwood, A. (2014). How, then, might the transsexual read?: Notes toward a trans literary history. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1(4), 590–604. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2815111>
- Feder, S., & Juhasz, A. (2016). Does visibility equal progress? A conversation on trans activist media. *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 57. Available at: <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc57.2016/-Feder-JuhaszTransActivism/index.html>
- Filippo, M. S. (2016). Female trouble: Representing transwomen in *The Danish Girl* and *The New Girlfriend*. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 16(3), 403–407. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15299716.2016.1199843>
- Gaut, B. (1997). Film authorship and collaboration. In R. Allen & M. Smith (Eds.), *Film theory and philosophy*, (pp. 149–172). Oxford University Press.
- Hale, J. (2009, November 18). *Suggested rules for non-transsexuals writing about transsexuals, transsexuality, transsexualism, or trans ____*. Sandy Stone. www.sandystone.com/hale.rules.html (Original work published 1997)
- Hansen, W. (2022, March 27). *A trans history of gay liberation in New Zealand*. The Spinoff. www.thespinnoff.co.nz/society/27-03-2022/a-trans-history-of-gay-liberation-in-new-zealand
- Hewison, D. (n.d.) *NEST – A short film by Willem Koller*. Boosted. Retrieved 4 August 2024 from <https://boosted.org.nz/projects/nest>
- Hill, G. R. (Director). (1982). *The World According to Garp* [Film]. Warner Bros. & Pan Arts.
- Hooper, T. (Director). (2015). *The Danish Girl* [Film]. Working Title Films, Artemis Productions, Amber Entertainment, Revision Pictures, Senator Global Productions, & Pretty Pictures.
- Horak, L. (2017). Tracing the history of trans and gender variant filmmakers. *The Spectator*, 37(2), 9–20. Available at https://cinema.usc.edu/spectator/37.2/2_Horak.pdf
- Irving, D. (2008). Normalised transgressions: Legitimizing the transsexual body as productive. *Radical History Review*, 2008(100), 38–59. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2007-021>
- Johnson, A. H. 2016. Transnormativity: A new concept and its validation through documentary film about transgender men. *Sociological Inquiry* 86(4), 465–91. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soin.12127>
- Keegan, C. M. (2013, June 1). Moving bodies: Sympathetic migrations in transgender narrativity. *Gender*, 57. Available at <https://www.colorado.edu/gendersarchive1998-2013/2013/06/01/moving-bodies-sympathetic-migrations-transgender-narrativity>
- Keegan, C. M. (2016). History, disrupted: The aesthetic gentrification of queer and trans cinema. *Social Alternatives* 35(3), 50–56. https://socialalternatives.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/keegan_soc_alt_vol_35_3.pdf
- Keegan, C. M. (2018). *Lana and Lilly Wachowski*. University of Illinois Press.

- Keegan, C. M. (2022, May 6). *Bad trans object*. [Virtual presentation]. Transgender Media Portal, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada. <https://carleton.ca/transmedialab/2022/video-cael-m-keegan-bad-trans-objects/>
- Koller, W. (Director). ((2023). *NEST* [Film]. Boost.
- Lelio, S. (Director). (2017). *A Fantastic Woman* [Film]. Fabula & Komplizen Film.
- Leung, H. H. (2014). Film. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1(1–2), 86–89. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2399686>
- Macintosh, P. (2023). *Aesthetics, authenticity, and authorship in trans media*. [PhD dissertation, Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington]. Open Access Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington. <https://doi.org/10.26686/wgtn.22597114>
- Meyers, C. (2020, July 14). Local transgender drama aims to save lives. *Good Magazine*. <https://goodmagazine.co.nz/local-transgender-drama-aims-to-save-lives/>
- Murray, N. (Director). (2009–present). *RuPaul's Drag Race* [TV series]. World of Wonder.
- Namaste, V. (2005). *Sex change, social change: Reflections on identity, institutions, and imperialism*. Women's Press.
- New Zealand International Film Festival. (2020, August 10). *Rūrangi | Q&A with Director Max Currie, Producers Craig Gainsborough, Cole Meyers and Elz Carrad*. [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcOOXVWHSvs&ab_channel=NZIntFilmFestival
- Piontek, T. (2012). Tears for queers: Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain*, Hollywood, and American attitudes toward homosexuality. *The Journal of American Culture*, 35(2), 123–134. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-734X.2012.00802.x>
- Prosser, J. (1998). *Second skins: The body narratives of transsexuality*. Columbia University Press.
- Schoenbrun, J. (Director). (2024). *I Saw the TV Glow* [Film]. Fruit Tree, Smudge Films, Hypnic Jerk, & Access Entertainment.
- Serano, J. (2007). *Whipping girl: A transsexual woman on sexism and the scapegoating of femininity*. Seal Press.
- Shadyac, T. (Director). (1994). *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* [Film]. Morgan Creek Productions.
- Steinbock, E. (2019). *Shimmering images*. Duke University Press.
- Steinmetz, K. (2014, May 29). *The transgender tipping point*. TIME. <https://time.com/135480/transgender-tipping-point/>
- Straube, W. 2020. Introduction: Visibility and screen politics after the transgender tipping point. *Screen Bodies* 5(1), 56–65. <https://doi.org/10.3167/screen.2020.050105>
- Stryker, S. (2017). *Transgender history: The roots of today's revolution* (2nd ed.). Seal.
- Tucker, D. (Director). (2005). *Transamerica* [Film]. Belladonna Productions.
- Vallée, J.-M. (Director). (2013). *Dallas Buyers Club* [Film]. Truth Entertainment & Voltage Pictures.